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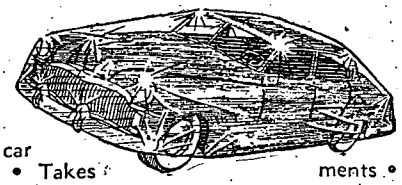

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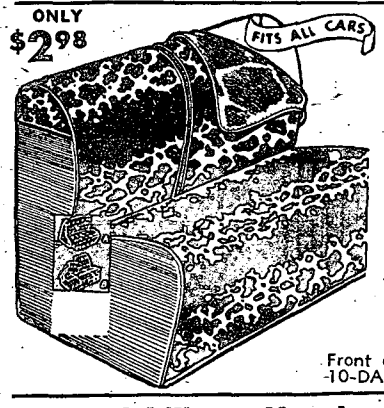

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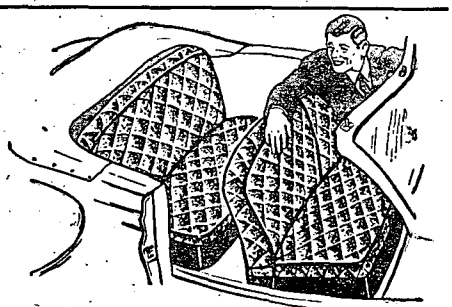

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MAY, 1952

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FANTASTIC ADVENTURES is published monthly by the Ziff-Davis Publishing Company at 185 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago 1, Illinois. Entered as second-class matter July 30, 1937, at the Post Office, Chicago, Ill., under the act of March 3, 1879. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office Department, Ottawa, Canada. Additional second class entry, Holyoke, Mass. **Postmaster—please return undelivered copies under form 3579 to 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Ill.**

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: U. S., Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U.S. Possessions, $2.50 for twelve issues; in British Empire, $3.50; all other foreign countries, $3.50 for twelve issues. SUBSCRIPTION SERVICE: All communications concerning subscriptions should be addressed to Circulation Dept., 64 E. Lake St., Chicago 1, Ill. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address.

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VOLUME 14 NUMBER 5

All Stories Complete

THE SOUL SNATCHERS (Novel—25,000) ..... by Lee Francis 8

Illustrated by Ed Emsler

Want to know how that brilliant young physicist works his equations so easily? Just transfer his brain into yours and you'll find out. But better not get stuck with it. He has problems too

STRICTLY FORMAL (Short-short—2,900) ..... by Gerald Vance 50

Illustrated by Frank Navarro

The trouble was, the Evanses didn't have many friends and hardly went any place. That's why it was so upsetting to finally get an invitation, and then not be able to decipher the address

WHO FLEE THEIR CHAINS (Short—7,400) ..... by Guy Archette 56

Illustrated by Tom Beecham

All Jerry wanted was to escape to Earth with Hazel—away from this murderous mob. But you can't learn the secrets of a bloodthirsty gang and then expect to go your own way peacefully

LET'S HAVE A LITTLE REVERENCE (Novelette—10,000) ... by Paul W. Fairman 70

Illustrated by Ed Emsler

Galactic Developments was in the undertaking business, which meant they needed bodies to bury. But they couldn't seem to make a living on Zeda 3. The old-rags peddler got the corpses here

A STAR HAS FALLEN (Short novel—20,000) ..... by John Fletcher 86

Illustrated by Paul Lundy

This babe was playing both sides against the middle. Until the day her old flame returned from the grave and she learned that one guy with a gun is a lot better than two guys with none

Front cover by Leo Ramon Summers, illustrating a scene from "The Soul Snatchers."

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The Editor's Notebook

A CONFIDENTIAL CHAT WITH THE EDITOR

FOR THE first time in exactly two years and five months, Lee Francis again makes an appearance in *FANTASTIC ADVENTURES*—this time in a horror-type suspense fantasy which had us pretty well spellbound until the finish. And it's not a finish you'll easily guess, we're willing to bet.

LEE FRANCIS is one of those writers who's as hard to corral as a bucking bronc. But once you tie him to a typewriter and he gets started, it's a cinch the result is one you won't forget. And "The Soul Snatchers" (see page 8) is in the best Francis tradition.

YESTERDAY BEING a beautiful Sunday afternoon, we got out the old family convertible and decided to get some more mileage under our belts. We had spent the morning going through back issues of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES and *AMAZING STORIES*, and had just finished reading the two Lawrence Chandler novels: "Forgotten Worlds" (FA, May 1948) and "Planet of No Return" (AS, May 1951). As we drove, it occurred to us to drop in at Larry's home in Westchester and put some of the same pressure on him which we'd used to get Lee Francis' lead novel for this month. We were hungry, too, and Larry's wife makes some of the best blueberry pancakes we've ever eaten.

BUT WHAT we got was better than a free meal, and with no pressure on our part either. We found Larry comfortably ensconced in his workroom re-reading, of all things, his own "Forgotten Worlds".

"I WAS just thinking, Les," he told us after the greetings were over, "I'd like to do a sequel to this. Would you be interested?"

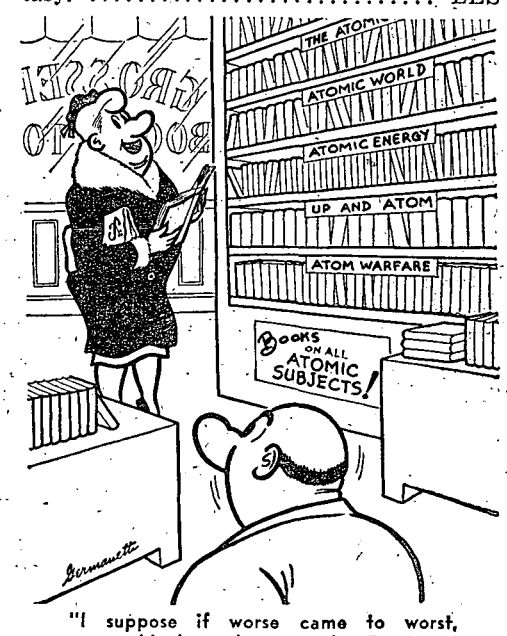
WOULD WE be interested! About as much as if somebody offered us a trade-in on our 1946 buggy for a sleek '52 model!

SO WE spent the rest of the afternoon and evening building up further exploits and adventures for Reed McGurn and his luscious lovely, Lua. Larry's committed now—so by July, and certainly no later than August—you should have the still-untitled sequel to the 1948 novel-of-the-year, "Forgotten Worlds".

WE'VE BEEN rather appalled, while watching the ever-increasing run of science-fiction stories on television, at what the writers of these shows call science fiction. By and large, they seem to go on the assumption that you can take the spurs off a cowboy, put him in a space suit, change his horse for a *zpff* and, using the same story formula you've used for the last fifteen years, get a science-fiction story.

THIS IS not so! A good science-fiction story must have all the requisites of any good fiction story, plus the unremovable element of science extrapolated on science known today. Without this, all you have is a run-of-the-mill western, detective, or adventure story. We're sure that this failing will straighten itself out in due time. The field is a new one—we guess it just takes time to get acquainted.

WE'VE JUST okay'd final proofs of our newest baby, the new FANTASTIC. And even we—veteran editors all—were overwhelmed anew at what this magazine has to offer. Brother—and sister—this is really a book for your money. Not since the day of the 3c giant ice-cream cone—which we can faintly but nostalgically remember—has there been such a bargain. This is the best 35c value this field has ever seen. Don't forget to haunt your newsstand—come March 21—for a new experience in science fiction and fantasy. ..... LES



"I suppose if worse came to worst, we could drop them on the Russians."

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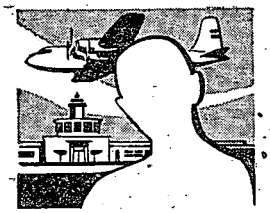
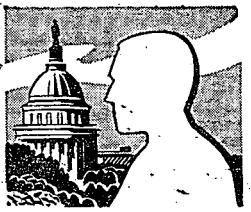
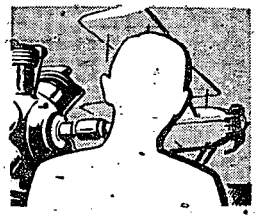


PRESIDENT of a leading airline.

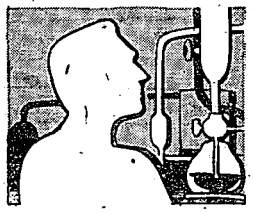


CHAIRMAN of an important national defense board.

INVENTOR of a well-known U. S. Army rifle.



DESIGNER of a famous aircraft engine.



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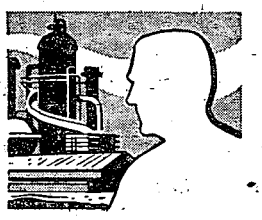
ENGINEER in charge of a famous company's engineering laboratory.



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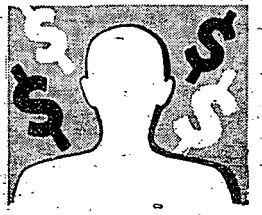

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She was wide awake, but she was dreaming, too — and the hands were probing . . . probing . . . .

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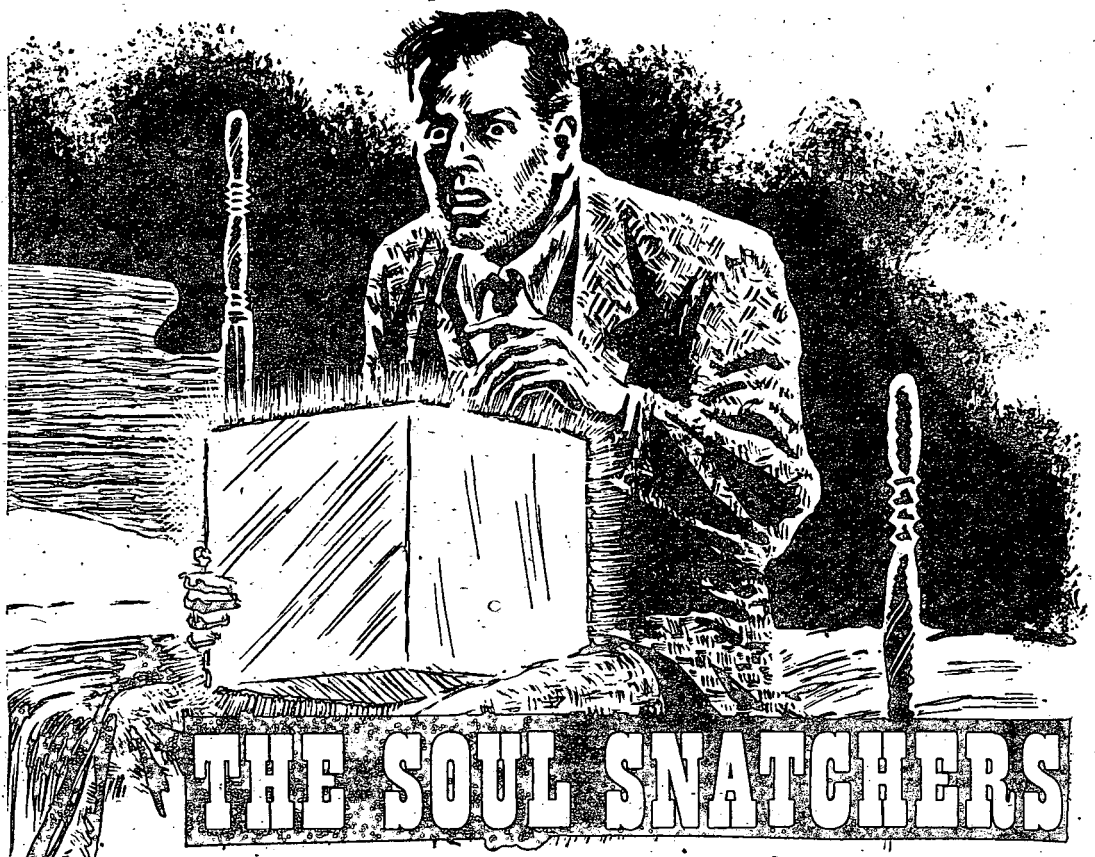

THE SOUL SNATCHERS

By Lee Francis

The weapon was a simple recipe: a woman's soul, a physicist's brain, and a gangster's evil. But there was no escaping the hell that it wreaked

MARCO LEE, the thirty-one-year-old nuclear physicist, was rated—privately—as the man in his class least likely to succeed. So, as often follows, Marco turned out to be a genius. They tried to build the atomic bomb without him, but finally gave up and called him in. He solved quite a few unsolvable problems without being able to explain his methods, and was somewhat bewildered when his fellow scientists treated him with deference. His attitude could be summed up by the introductory phrase he always used before explaining a triple obtuse problem: "Now, it's really very simple..."

On this particular night, Marco Lee worked very late in his private

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office at the closely guarded atomic plant. He had spent long hours putting figures, symbols, confounding notations, into a small black book. Once finished with this task, he took a plain envelope from his desk, addressed it, stamped it, slipped the black book therein, and sighed with relief at a big job well done.

He said good night to each of the four guards between his office and the street, and also to the man who brought his car. He drove out of the plant and pulled up beside a mailbox some five blocks away. He got out of the car and dropped the envelope containing the black book into the mailbox. Then he turned to get back into the car.

But this last act was never accomplished. He stopped suddenly, standing motionless. His face took on a strange, empty look. Then he backed away from the car as though having caught himself in an act of thievery. He looked up and down the street like a lost, betrayed dog wondering what had become of its master.

Had anyone been closely observing Marco Lee at that moment, he would have had no difficulty in reading certain questions from his face: Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing here? I don't understand it. I don't understand anything at all.

With the same fixed, bewildered expression, he walked away into the deep night.

"LET'S REVIEW what has been done," Simton Paine said, and at that moment Police Captain Sam Spaulding hated the Federal man's insides.

Not that Sam was antisocial. He was just tired to the marrow of his bones, and they both knew what had been done. Everything.

"Nothing in the hospitals," Sam said.

"Nor the morgue," Simton added. "We turned over every mattress in Skid Row. Nothing but bugs."

"No reports from the boys dragging the lake?"

"Sure. Three people that did a dutch. But none of them the atomic whizz kid."

"No word from any of the stations?"

"No."

Simton scratched the tip of his left ear. "What do you think are the chances of his being in a bull pen somewhere—maybe some outlying station? Let's say he got drunk and dirty and unrecognizable. Over a weekend they haul bums in by the carload, throw them into cells to sober up. Maybe he was just overlooked."

Sam Spaulding shook his head. "Any captain that overlooked Marco Lee and has him in his bull pen wouldn't ever live it down. Don't worry about him being overlooked. Not with patrol lads out moving garbage cans."

Simton was a trifle annoyed, though he strove not to show it. He interpreted Sam's weariness for a defeatist attitude. "Then we just concede he faded into thin air and give the whole thing up?"

Sam shook his head sadly. "You young guys from Washington! I've got ideas, but all of them may not be right. In the first place, I don't think Marco Lee is dead. If he was we'd know by now. It's simple to kill a man, but you'd be surprised how hard it is to hide a body. People have eyes. They see things. They report them." He looked ruefully at the foot-high stack of papers on his desk. "All these people saw Marco Lee and they called up to tell us about it."

"Captain, please don't misunderstand me. I'm not criticizing your system."

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Sam ignored that. "In the second place, I don't think he left town. The background is wrong for a skip caper."

Simton turned palms upward. "Then why don't we find him?"

"It's a big town, son. It goes from No Man's Land north to Indiana south. It goes from the lake to the dairy farms and golf courses out west. A big town. But he's in it and we'll find him. Somebody will call up. That phone will ring."

The phone on Sam's desk rang sharply.

Sam picked it up, propped the receiver against his ear and lit a cigarette while he said, "Spaulding." Then, "Yeah—yeah—yeah, lady. Sure I got it. We'll look into it. Thanks for calling."

He hung up and looked at Simton Paine with added weariness and some discouragement. "That was a dame. Marco's turned burglar now. He's trying to break into a house over in the Lincoln Avenue slums." Sam yawned. "Christ, I'm tired!"

MARCO LEE, after mailing his letter, began walking along streets and turning corners with no idea of having ever existed before that moment. And, after the first shock of being born into this strange gray world, he had no feeling that it had ever been different. He moved through a brooding residential section and came out into a well-lit throughfare filled with people bent on an evening's recreation. Bright neon theater and cabaret signs warmed him somewhat, but not enough to cause him to stop and investigate. He walked on and the night-life area faded away.

It was now that Marco became conscious of the footsteps beating an even rhythm behind him, and the first memory pattern of his new existence flashed into consciousness. Those footsteps had been dogged, persistent. They had been sounding behind him all during his aimless wanderings from the mail box. No fear arose from the knowledge that he was being followed, and when a low, well-modulated voice called, "One moment, please," Marco turned and waited with no other emotion than curiosity.

The man was tall, somewhat over six feet, and wore expensive but unobtrusive clothes topped by a black Homburg. He was probably in his middle forties, and the yellow street lights confirmed the fact that he was handsome after the dark, mustached manner.

"One moment, please," he repeated, stepped up to Marco and turned the scientist gently until the light shone in his face. The dark man smiled reassuringly as upon a child. With no further greeting nor introduction, he tilted Marco's head back and peered into his face. He raised Marco's right upper eyelid and studied the revealed tissue. Then the left lid as he pursed his lips in an abstract, questioning grimace.

He took Marco's hand and pressed the flesh between the thumb and first finger, holding the hand close to his eyes to study the result. It seemed satisfactory. And now a passerby would have been treated to the spectacle of a man taking another man's pulse under a street light at midnight.

The man dropped Marco's arm, stood regarding him thoughtfully for a moment, after which he tipped his Homburg, smiled and walked off down the street.

Marco did not react one way or another. He stood looking after the man until the latter turned a corner and disappeared from view. Then he continued his own aimless tramping. A lighted window on an otherwise

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dark street brought him to a halt. Odors from within told him he was hungry. He opened the door, went inside and sat down on a stool at a white-topped counter.

THE PLACE was empty except for a pretty girl in a green uniform who was polishing the glass in front of a pie case. She smiled, "Evening."

Marco said nothing.

The girl came down the counter, slight uncertainty marring the still-present smile.

"Coffee?"

Marco remained mute. After a moment, he nodded.

The waitress drew a cup of the brew and set it down in front of him. Marco stared at it.

"Not very fresh, I'm afraid, mister. I'm just ready to close up."

Marco Lee raised his eyes to stare at the girl. Her smile faded as though she felt embarassment under his frank gaze. To cover this she reached for the closest bowl and pushed it in front of him. "Sugar?"

He put a spoonful into his coffee without comment and stirred slowly. His eyes lowered somewhat until he was staring at her shapely breast but obviously not seeing it, and finally the girl asked, "Are—are you all right?"

He lifted the coffee cup and drank. He set it down again. He did not reply.

This was a most extraordinary procedure, but the girl was not frightened. Marco's manner was too child-like, too pitifully bewildered to generate fear in the girl.

She said, "You don't look well at all. You're pale and—and you look like you've been through a siege of some kind. Have you been sick?"

Marco did not answer. He drank his coffee, and finally the girl went about her closing duties. When she was ready to leave, Marco still sat at the counter staring straight ahead.

The girl came from the back room where she'd changed clothes and approached him with some uncertainty. "It's time to close now. We'll—you'll have to go."

Marco turned on his stool with a troubled air. He looked at the girl, then at his coffee cup and the ones stacked neatly behind the counter. He held up his own with a mute gesture.

The girl took it from his hand, gently, and set it on the counter. "It's all right. The morning man will get it. I've got to turn off the lights now."

She snapped off all save a small night light, then remembered and said, "That will be a dime—for the coffee."

Marco sat looking at her as though he hadn't the least idea what she was talking about. New uneasiness shadowed the girl's pity. "Well, that'll be all right. The coffee was on the house. You've got to leave now."

Marco got up from the stool and walked toward the door. But not until the girl had signalled for the move by going toward the door herself. He followed her out into the street and stood waiting while she locked the door. Pocketing the keys she said, "Well, good night. I go this way. Drop in again."

SHE STARTED to walk away, and without hesitation Marco followed her. As the girl looked back, he came to her side and matched his pace with hers. He kept his hands in the pockets of his jacket and looked straight ahead.

"Oh—you—you're going my way?"

For the second time since they'd met, Marco nodded an affirmative to a question.

The girl felt that she should have been frightened. She should order

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this man on his way. She should scream if necessary. She should call a cop.

But she found herself dredging up excuses for not doing the sensible thing. If ever there was a harmless person, this man was it! And after all, he had as much right as she to walk down the street. In fact, she'd look a little silly if she called a policeman. What would her charges be?

Satisfied that she was acting wisely, she said, "My name is April—April Higgins. I live three blocks down—near Sedgewick."

Marco said nothing. They walked on, side by side, past Elm, Cedar, and Wilson, until April stopped, thus bringing Lee to an automatic halt.

"I'll have to leave you now. It was nice of you to walk me home. Goodbye."

She smiled and turned in to mount a flight of steps. Then stopped as she realized Marco was right behind her.

Now came a certain fear—and a sharpness. "No—no. You can't come up. I live in one room, all by myself. I wouldn't think of letting you come in!"

She hurried up the steps, unlocked the door swiftly and got inside. Then, feeling safer with the door almost closed, she turned to look. Marco stood on the sidewalk gazing up at her exactly after the manner of a pup who had followed someone home only to be stopped cold just this side of the goal.

April called, "Good night," and closed the door.

A few minutes later, in her room, April Higgins brought herself up sharply. Her eyes widened as though she had just come out of some mild form of trance. What could she have been thinking of! The man was sick. Anyone could see that. She should have brought him in and called a doctor. The stricken, confused look in his eyes. Why, he—

She fled down the stairs—out into the street. It was deserted.

Slowly, April Higgins went back to her room. Maybe he'd come to the restaurant tomorrow. She hoped so.

MARCO LEE was disappointed when April Higgins wouldn't let him climb the stairs with her. She had been a very restful person to be with and Marco was loath to leave her.

But scarcely a block away, he forgot her and became occupied with something going on in his brain. A strange, incomprehensible urge to go immediately to a place he had certainly never heard of because he did not even know where it was.

And something else also in his mind. He straightened suddenly. The aimless droop left his shoulders. His face became sharp and alert of expression. Unconsciously he adjusted the knot of his tie, brushed a finger across his upper lip as though to stroke a nonexistent mustache; tapped his careless slouch hat into place in a manner indicating it to be a most proper hat—perhaps an expensive Homburg.

Then these strange, alien mannerisms vanished from him; vanished as quickly as they had come. His shoulders drooped. The alertness left his face; vacancy again occupied his eyes. He was back where he'd started.

But the homing urge remained. He turned at the next corner, went a block east, turned again and traveled back south, in the direction from which he had originally come. He walked slowly, at an even, deliberate pace that bespoke complete disinterest in the place he was going except for an urge to eventually arrive there.

But something went wrong. It did not seem logical that instinct would

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direct him across town to an empty, silent coal yard. Yet, that was where he ended up. Against a high fence which he traversed until he came to a break in the wires. He wriggled through the hole and walked slowly in pitch darkness until he came to another obstacle. He turned and walked at right angles to his previous line of travel and was stopped again.

This time he did not seek to go further. It dawned upon him suddenly that he was very tired. He did the elemental thing. He lay down against whatever it was that had stopped him and was asleep in a matter of seconds.

DAWN CAME to find him still sleeping. The sun rose higher. The usual business day in the coal yard began but no one found Marco Lee's resting place, because it chanced to be in a little-used section of the yard behind a pile of second-hand lumber.

Lee slept until ten o'clock. Upon opening his eyes, he was completely awake and there was no surprise or fright within him because of his peculiar location. He took it, as he had taken everything else since mailing that letter, with a stolid calm and unruffled demeanor.

He walked back as he had come and was not seen until he went again through the broken fence into the street. There, the superintendent of the coal yard spotted him and yelled with hostility. But nothing indicated to Marco that the yell was directed his way. He walked off down the street and the superintendent, busy with something else, merely scowled and let him go.

Again that peculiar urge to go somewhere; that voiceless command trying to direct his footsteps. But the need of food was greater. Marco traveled back as he had come the night before to arrive again at the little restaurant. He went in and sat down at the counter.

Fortunate he was that this restaurant catered to laboring people, or he would never have gotten in. A thick growth of beard covered his jowls, over which was spread layers of coal-yard filth. His suit bore no resemblance to the two-hundred-dollar property it had once been.

April Higgins looked twice before recognizing him. She came down the counter and cried, "Good heavens! What happened to you?"

Marco didn't seem to know. At least he did not answer.

The girl said, "How about some dinner? The roast beef is good."

Marco nodded vacantly.

Twenty minutes later he was staring at the empty dishes before him. April began clearing them away. After a while she came back and said, "That will be a dollar ten."

Marco apparently did not understand. April glanced about quickly; then leaned forward and whispered: "Money—in your pocket. Haven't you got any?"

Marco reached into his pocket and brought forth a piece of green paper. April extracted it from his fingers. "One-ten out of five." She moved toward the register, but by the time she got back with the change Marco was nowhere in sight.

THAT STRANGE instinct—vague yet powerful—kept trying to direct his footsteps. It took him suddenly out of the restaurant and down the street. But again failure. He landed this time in the dirty, depressing squalor of Skid Row.

Sharp eyes spotted him and were not fooled by the stubble and the coal dust. He was approached by the owner of the sharp eyes.

Two hours later he lay in the alley

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and there was no money in his pockets. He came around finally, explored the bump on his head, and began again to walk. He walked until he lost track of time. He lay down and slept and got up again to walk.

And always in response to that maddening urge within him. Again and again, it had tried to point his feet in the proper direction. Always it had failed, but it kept on trying.

Until Marco walked up a dirty alley running parallel to Lincoln Avenue. He was more alert now, a trifle clearer of eye; even in his weakness and hunger, there was a quickening of life within him.

He opened a gate he had never seen before and walked through an areaway that led him to the front door of a small, two-story building. He went inside—into a dark narrow hallway that reeked of sickening odors. Up a flight of narrow stairs to another door.

Now, for the first time since his transformation, he smiled. This was it. Here was the place that nagging urge had tried again and again to make him find. He opened the door and stepped into as revolting a place as could possibly be imagined.

The windows were caked with filth. Only dim gray light filtered in. But a single unshaded bulb hung by a cord from the middle of the ceiling to light the room mercilessly.

Marco looked around with a sense of proprietorship in a hovel he had never before visited. It consisted of three rooms, but a person could move no further than the center of the first one. The other two were cluttered and packed from wall to wall and from floor to ceiling with all manner of debris. Old castoff furniture; stray pieces of hardware; ancient magazines and books. Tires, papers, garbage—and dirt—dirt—dirt.

The debris left only a small part of the first room inhabitable—a five-foot circle in the center, and within this circle was the most interesting item in the place.

A woman. Ancient as time itself, she sat in a rocking chair which had apparently long since ceased to rock. Her hair, gray, greasy, witch-like, hung in strands, revealing a caked, dirty scalp. Her cheeks were sunken to a depth that revealed an almost complete absence of teeth. Her arms looked like two-inch water pipes covered with pale skin. From beneath a dirty gray skirt there protruded pipe-stem legs no thicker than the arms.

She stared straight ahead—eyes open, fixed, unmoving. From all appearances, the poor unfortunate had starved to death.

MARCO LEE did not seem at all revolted or upset at the sight of the crone. He closed the door, came forward, and looked her over with clinical interest. Without touching the body, he circled it to peer close, then stepped back for a wider perspective.

He himself had changed remarkably. Bright now—alert, quick of movement—he gave off examining the crone's body and turned his attention to other things. He studied the conglomeration of refuse about him as though seeking a single item in this strange collection. He went about, pushing back a chair here, kicking a broken table out of the way there, for perhaps ten minutes.

Then his eyes widened. He stooped swiftly and came up with a foot-square block of metal so bright and new-looking it was grotesquely out of place in this cluttered hovel.

The unit could possibly have been termed a box, though it had no front, back, top, or bottom. All sides were identical and composed of an aluminum-like material that gave off a

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clear, bright sheen.

It did not seem to be particularly heavy. Marco Lee held it lightly, on the tips of his ten fingers, to study it with a bright, alert interest.

His manner was that of a man who has come a long way to gain a great treasure. A person who had triumphed over many trials and mistakes to win through, finally, to a worth-while objective.

But suddenly it was as though the instinct within him, the unrecognizable guide, sounded a signal. Marco put the shining box under his arm and cocked his head into a listening attitude. He frowned slightly. Then, without a glance at the pitifully wasted form in the rocking chair, he tiptoed out of the room and closed the door.

He went down the stairs, and as he progressed, his manner became one of increasing alarm. He actually crouched, now, holding the box tight to his body and shielding it with his jacket. Back in the areaway, he gave in to panic, whirling in all directions, seeking new exits.

A door about midway between the alley and the house offered sanctuary. Marco went through it to find himself in a large cement basement, obviously the fire room of some large building. Hurrying frantically, as though time were of the essence, he mounted a steel ladder that led up over the huge furnace. Back behind the boiler, he crooned his satisfaction at finding a nook so thick with dust as to indicate complete seclusion. He set the metal box down carefully and then proceeded to cover it over with handfuls of ashes and soot. Soon the box was completely buried and Marco smiled. He straightened as though a job of major proportions had been completed. He went back down the steel ladder and out into the alley.

Immediately upon his exit, two men hove in sight from around the corner. Marco stood watching them.

"Hey, fellow—you!"

Marco said nothing. His alertness was fading away, like a bright lamp from which the oil had been drained. The flat, empty look returned and he appeared to be sincerely wondering who he was, where he had come from, and why he was standing in that alley.

"Hold it, fellow! What's your name?"

"What are you doing here?"

Marco stood mute.

A squad car poked its nose into the alley and crawled forward. Expert hands went over Marco's body, searching for possible weapons.

"Okay. Don't dummy up. What's your name? Where do you live?"

"Arthur Benson?" Thus did Marco Lee speak for the first time since he'd mailed that letter a long, unmeasured time before. And his words were not a statement but a question; a rather pathetic, pleading question. The tone was eloquent. It said, *Please—I'm Arthur Benson, aren't I? I must be. I've got to be Arthur Benson. If not, I am without an anchor, floating—insane. I say I'm Arthur Benson. Please agree with me.*

One of the cops said, "Got any identification?"

At this point, Marco Lee collapsed.

THE MAN was tall, somewhat over six feet, and wore an expensive satin dressing gown over a white linen shirt and razor-edged trousers. He had a black pencil mustache and was probably in his middle forties.

He was pacing the living room of a small but lavishly furnished apartment, and kept glancing at his wrist watch as though he expected company.

The man was in obvious physical discomfort. He stopped his pacing at

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times to sit down on the edge of the lounge and press his forehead into the palms of his hands. During these moments his teeth clenched and his whole body went rigid, as though resisting a wave of pain or nausea. Then these periods would pass and he would again resume his nervous pacing.

He had looked at his watch perhaps a dozen times when a muted buzzer sounded and he sprang to the wall phone connecting his apartment with the lobby.

"Yes?"

A muffled response, after which the man frowned and said with impatience: "Of course this is Arthur Benson. Whom did you expect?"

He paused, frowned again. "Yes—yes, I'm alone. Come right up."

A few moments later two men entered the room. Arthur Benson closed the door after them and resumed his nervous pacing.

The newcomers were not alike. One was a small, dapper individual with a distinctly oriental cast to his countenance. The other was a stolid-faced Nordic who sat down on the lounge in an awkward, spread-legged position and put his small black pig-eyes on Benson. He asked, "You have the—material?"

Benson nodded. "I can put my hands on it at any time."

The man frowned. "What do you mean—you can put your hands on it?"

"Just what I said. Can't you understand English?"

The other grinned and now there was frank admiration in his face. "I got to hand it to you, Benson—or whoever you are. I got to hand it to you."

Benson whirled. "Or whoever I am? Explain that, please."

The Nordic turned to the Oriental. "He's kind of jumpy today, Norshi. What do you think he's got on his mind?"

The impeccable Norshi did not respond well to his friend's question. "I don't know, but I don't particularly care for your attitude and I don't think Mr. Benson does either. We are here on business. Let's get to it."

The gross man frowned and Benson seemed to forget the explanation he had so lately demanded. Benson said, "I called you here, Greshman—and you Norshi—so I could make delivery of the black book and accept payment—"

"Fine," Greshman rumbled. "I got the money right here. Forty thousand American dollars. If you'll just—"

BENSON held up a hand. "—but something has come up in the meantime—something very serious. The terms of our deal will have to be changed. I don't want your money."

Greshman's jaw dropped, and even the inscrutable mask of Norshi fell away a trifle to reveal astonishment.

"Don't want our *money!* Say—what is this, Benson?"

Benson was again in the clutches of one of his strange attacks. He dropped to the lounge, gripped his head in both hands and rocked back and forth.

"Are you ill?" Norshi inquired with precise politeness.

Benson gritted his teeth. "It will pass," he muttered. "It will pass." He spoke as though each word were an effort.

"Can I get you something?"

"No—no."

Now the attack lessened in severity and Benson began composing himself. "I'm quite all right now—or I will be in a few moments."

"Good," Greshman rumbled. "We can get back to the business. I'll give

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you the money. You'll give me the book."

"I said things had changed. I don't want your money. Instead, I want a service from you. When the service has been performed, I'll be happy to give you the book."

"What service is this?" Norshi wanted to know.

"A man must be killed."

The two visitors glanced at each other; then turned their eyes back to Benson. "I—we don't understand," Norshi breathed politely.

Benson was a bundle of tension. He was obviously trying to keep a grip on himself. "It's easy enough," he snapped. "Even a fool should be able to understand. I want you to kill a man—kill him as soon as humanly possible. Then I'll give you the book."

"Kill who?"

"A nuclear physicist named Marco Lee. You will find him in Room 1106 of the Kinsman Memorial Hospital. It is imperative to me that his life be ended at once."

"Now look here," Greshman said, "we made a deal. You're going to live up to it. Where's that book?"

"Unless you do as I ask you'll never get it!"

Norshi's shining eyes had turned venemous. "If assassination is necessary," he said with deadly meaning, "perhaps we'd better—"

"Kill me? I think not. You want that book, and I'm sure you'll see things my way. You two have killed before. You have no scruples. And even for men of your means, forty thousand dollars for one quick death is a good price." Benson looked with a certain veiled disgust at Greshman. "When you started out, my friend, you killed for as little as fifty dollars, and you were glad to get it."

Norshi held up a hand. "We are reasoning adults. Let's not bicker like children."

The sullen Greshman choked off his intended reply.

"We are, of course, not closing the door to your proposal," Norshi said smoothly, "but we are certainly entitled to know a little more about your reasons and motives before we stain our fingers with—murder."

"Sure," Greshman said. "What's the pitch? Isn't Marco Lee the scientist you bought that book from?"

Benson smiled ever so faintly. "The book was obtained from him, but not exactly in the manner you state."

Norshi had set his fingertips together, steeplewise. His eyes bored into Benson's face. "You are an amazing man, sir. I have wondered about you for a long time. You have, it seems, an almost superhuman ability to come by things of value."

THERE WAS a moment of deep silence, after which Norshi's not unpleasant singsong voice went on: "You have always interested me, Benson, but I don't think I like you particularly. There's something about you—"

Benson reacted in a far sharper manner than the remark seemed to justify. He jerked erect and appeared ready to make violent issue of the point. "What are you getting at, Norshi?"

"Something I sense but can't define," Norshi went on. "I might even go so far as to say, something unhealthy."

Greshman, the unsubtle, waved a hamlike hand. "Let's cut out this talking in riddles. What's the dope, Benson? This Marco Lee got something on you? Did you bungle the job?"

"Not in the sense you mean. But it was seriously bungled from another angle."

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Greshman leaned forward threateningly. "You didn't pull us into it, did you? If you did there'll be a murder all right, and it won't cost no forty grand."

"Stop it," Benson snapped. "Let me put it in a few words. For reasons most important to me, Marco Lee must be killed. It must be done immediately. I want you two to do it."

"And if we refuse?" Norshi asked softly.

"You won't refuse. A killing means nothing to you. In fact, I'm surprised you haven't jumped at the chance to make a quick forty thousand—the money you were going to pay me for the book."

"I'm inclined to take that as an insult, Benson."

"Take it as you like. I have you over the barrel and you know it. No murder—no black book."

Norshi sat back and sighed delicately. He looked at Greshman. "I'm afraid the gentleman speaks the truth. And I'm sure he's immovably adamant."

"Cut out the big words," Greshman grunted. "Talk English."

"I was saying—Mr. Marco Lee will have to be done away with."

Norshi got to his feet. "We will accept your proposition, sir. I resent it a great deal, but I have enough perception to see that you are in some kind of a desperate mess. When forty thousand dollars does not interest you, you are indeed in trouble."

Benson's relief was apparent. "When will you...ah...accomplish—?"

"We will complete the assissination as soon as it is safely possible to do so. That is all I can tell you."

"You'll notify me as soon as it is done?"

"Notify you—hell," Greshman snorted. "We'll come knocking on your door. And, brother, you better be waiting with that book in your hands!"

"I'll be glad to give you the book, but hurry—hurry!"

As the two men left, Benson was upon the threshold of another spell.

CONRAD DAKIN probably knew more about the human brain than any living man. His services invariably commanded a four-figure price, and he usually knew what he was doing.

But, seated at Marco Lee's bedside, he was frankly and admittedly puzzled. "I'm rather at sea on this case, gentlemen," he said—his audience a group from Kinsman Memorial's staff. "This is no simple case of amnesia—that I'll stake my reputation on. This man did not merely lose his memory and go wandering off looking for it. Possibly his memory is gone, but its loss is secondary in importance to the major abnormality here existing."

"And what is that abnormality, Doctor?"

Dakin shrugged. "I don't know. His responses are negative when they should be positive and vice versa. I've run every test I know and he seems diabolically intent on crossing me up at every juncture."

"It's obviously the result of some terrible shock."

"Obviously—but what variety of shock? Not physical. His weakened condition is due to exposure, a tap on the skull which produced no concussion, and sustained fasting." Dakin twirled his glasses. "I might say in passing that the man had an iron constitution. He is remarkably strong even now. In a day or two he'll be as good as new—physically, that is. Mentally? I really couldn't say. A-

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strange case."

"What course of treatment do you recommend, Doctor?"

Dakin shrugged. "It's difficult to say. Observation is the main thing, of course." The great specialist shook his head as he turned away. "We work so hard—we try so hard. It's amazing how little we really know."

The medical men filed out and Marco Lee opened his eyes. He had not been nearly as far gone as he had appeared to be. But he was a most bewildered young man. His memory, to some extent, had returned, but all the years before the mailing of the letter were tenuously vague and very far away. Also, they didn't seem to matter much. The Here and the Now were what mattered.

His mind was full of so many unanswered questions. Why had he gone into that alley on Lincoln Avenue? Whence had come the mystic guidance to his footsteps? Up squalid stairs and into a filthy hovel. The dead staring sightless at the wall.

The searching for and the finding of the queer metal block. Marco was frightened as he realized he had gone to the hovel for that precise purpose; frightened because he did not know *why*. Nor did he understand the urge to hide the box when his greatly sharpened senses told him he was being trapped.

And of what importance was the box? Where did it fit into this skein of madness which was being woven around him?

Unbidden came the face of April Higgins into his recollection; and with its coming Marco's tense muscles relaxed somewhat. The turbulence in his mind gentled down and he smiled.

NORSHI stood for a long time in sheltering shadows near the service entrance of the Kinsman Memorial Hospital. Under his topcoat he wore the conventional whites of a busboy. In his mind—purchased at a good price from a *bona fide* orderly—was knowledge of Kinsman routine and procedure.

Time passed. Early evening became late evening and activity fell off a pace. At eleven forty-five, the ancient doorman got up from his chair and hobbled off to see about his coffee. He would be gone ten minutes—not more than fifteen.

Ample time. Long before it had expired, Norshi was riding the self-service elevator to the eleventh floor. He hoped fervently that the night nurse would not be at her desk. His prayer was not answered. She was there—writing reports.

She looked up and Norshi said, "I have come for the pan wagon. It is needed on the ninth floor." The nurse nodded with disinterest and indicated the wagon with a movement of her head.

Norshi said, "Thank you," and began pushing the wagon down the hall, away from the elevator.

"Where are you going?"

"Over to the ramp. It's only two floors."

The nurse went back to her reports. Norshi pushed the wagon through a quarter of a block of hospital hall and turned a corner. He found a convenient door—pushed the wagon out onto the fire escape and left it there. He went on down the hall and slipped softly into room 1106.

A slim figure lay quietly in the white bed. Norshi licked his dry lips and cat-footed forward. The figure under the white bed clothes did not move. Norshi stood looking down at Marco Lee—the still features, the closed eyes. Norshi said, "Hssssss."

Marco Lee's eyes opened slowly. He saw the inscrutable Oriental face

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looking down at him. He said nothing.

"I am a friend of Arthur Benson. Do you know him? Does the name mean anything to you?"

A slight shock registered in Marco's mind. Benson! Arthur Benson!

"Why, I'm Arthur Benson. Or am I? No. I can't be. I am Marco Lee. But how do I know that? I don't know who Marco Lee is either. There in the alley, near that place, I remember telling them I was Arthur Benson when they asked me. But why? I seem to think I'm two different men. But am I either of them? How can I tell when I don't know who they are.

"Can you speak?"

"Yes."

"Tell me—do you know Arthur Benson?"

"I'm not sure."

"Did you give him some data concerning nuclear physics? Some very valuable data?"

"No."

"Please don't lie. It is very important that you tell the truth."

"I am telling the truth. I gave no data to anyone."

Norshi shrugged. "Very well. Tell me this. Did you ever hear of a woman named Nadine Kildane?"

Of course. Nadine Kildane. A horrible, wasted crone sitting dead in the middle of indescribable debris in the Lincoln Avenue slums. Nadine Kildane. Her name beyond all doubt. But how do I know with such certainty? How do I know?

"Answer me."

"I never heard of her."

Norshi glanced uneasily toward the door. Faint rubber-muffled footsteps were approaching. Norshi's spine tightened. The footsteps came abreast of the door, then faded as they grew more distant.

"One more question. Did you ever hear of an eccentric scientist named Karl Boorman?"

"Yes. I've heard the name. But I know nothing about him."

I do know something about him, but what? It's maddening. It's frightening. Insanity?

"Are you at all familiar with the Boorman vibration? I think he coded it OX49B."

The metal box!

"No, I am not."

Norshi smiled gently and reached toward his hip pocket. "It was a long shot, my friend. I thought you might have some of the information I've been seeking. But I guess you don't know much of anything."

Norshi's hand came into view.

MARCO LEE took Norshi by the wrist and levered it expertly. The knife fell from the hand and Norshi bit his lip against the pain. Then he was moving helplessly across the bed, following a leverage to keep his arm from being broken. He came down helpless across Marco Lee's body. Then something crunched against his skull and consciousness left him.

Marco Lee put the heavy water jug back on the night stand. For years judo had been his hobby, and with the sudden knowledge that Norshi planned his death, he'd moved from long force of habit.

But now reaction set it. His sanity, balanced to a hair line, was capable of strange reactionary tricks. Stark fear flooded his mind. They wanted to kill him. Who? The people in the hospital? Perhaps. This assailant wore an orderly's uniform. Death on all sides of him. He had to get out. Had to get away. Out in the darkness of the night he would be safe until all this mental upheaval subsided.

He pushed Norshi to the floor and

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got out of bed and went to the closet. His clothing had not been thrown away. It lay in a heap on the closet floor. He blessed this oversight on the part of someone and began to dress.

A few minutes later he peered into the hall and found it empty. As he closed the door he heard Norshi stir and groan on the floor beside the bed. Marco did not go back. He continued on—moved with animal cunning until he found a fire escape exit. He pushed a rubber-tired cart out of the way and went swiftly down the iron steps. In a very short time he was just another citizen walking the night streets.

But they were no longer sanctuary to him. He had escaped from the hospital, but his fears remained. The killers were clever—that he knew. They would not give up. They would hunt until they found him. He would never be safe.

Weakness wrenched at his body and he went into a dark alley and leaned against a wall; breathing heavily while the world spun around him. Slowly the weakness passed. There had to be some place—some place. As he turned to leave the alley there was a flash of white at its entrance under the street light. Quick footsteps approaching.

Marco turned and ran blindly into the darkness. The footsteps behind him quickened to match the beat of his own.

APRIL HIGGINS was asleep and dreaming of heavy hailstone hitting the roof—threatening to smash it. She awoke and found the stones were the fists of someone beating on her door. She threw on a robe, opened the door and saw a stark, fear-stained face.

"You! Why—why—what happened? Why did you come here?"

"They're trying to kill me. You have to let me in!"

Without hesitation, April Higgins pulled Marco into the room. She looked up and down the hall to see if the commotion had awakened anyone else. All was quiet. She closed and locked the door. Marco was standing by the window looking out around the drawn shade. April went to him, feeling the emotional turbulence that wracked his being.

"You shouldn't have come here. Why didn't you stay in the hospital? You belong in a hospital."

"How did you know—where I came from?"

"I read it in the papers—all the excitement. And I saw your picture."

"Then you know who I am?"

"Of course. Marco Lee."

"That's who they say I am—"

"Come and sit down. I have a burner. I can make you a pot of tea."

Marco shook his head impatiently. "No. I don't need tea. I need some sane person to talk to. I'm living in a world of madmen, and pretty soon I'm going to be as bad as they are. I need somebody to talk to. Will you talk to me?"

"Of course. But you must rest a while first."

He framed a reply, but April Higgins came close and put her arm around him to lead him toward a chair, and his hand brushed across the contour of her breast hidden beneath the robe she wore. He took her by the shoulders and turned her around until she faced him. He looked wonderingly into her eyes.

"You're very beautiful."

"Never mind that—now. Come and sit down."

But he continued to hold her. "Do you think I'm crazy? Do you think I'm beyond hope?"

"I think you're a very mixed-up young man." She drew him to the bed and sat down beside him. His hair was mussed, and she smiled almost

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The shiny new block of metal looked incongruous in the same room with the dead ancient

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tenderly as she brushed it back off his forehead. "The paper said you were an amnesia victim. When you came into the restaurant the other night did you know who you were?"

"No. My life seemed to have started a short time before that when I walked away from a mailbox. There was a car standing beside the box and I started to get into it. But it wasn't mine. I had never seen it before."

"It *was* your car, so you must have driven up to the mailbox and gotten out. Do you remember posting a letter or something?"

"No. But there was a feeling— I remember it now. It was as if I had been—well, dead for a long time-and had suddenly come back to life."

"That still doesn't prove it wasn't plain amnesia." She took his hand and patted it. "Try to think—try to remember back—before the mailbox."

"THERE'S TOO much to wonder about *after* the mailbox. The things I did—the things some force inside me told me to do—that I don't understand. I went to a cluttered-up apartment on Lincoln Avenue. I went there after a box and I found the box and then I hid it. There was a woman in the place—a dead woman who looked as though she had starved to death."

April Higgins raised a hand and turned his face toward hers. She looked into his eyes. "Are you sure about that? A place on Lincoln Avenue?"

"I'm certain."

"It isn't just something you read in the papers and mentally associated yourself with?"

"No. Was there—?"

The girl crossed the room and brought a copy of an evening paper to the bed. "Here it is." She sat down and began to read. "The headline says, 'Mystery recluse found dead in squalor.' It goes on—'As a result of a neighbor's complaint concerning prowlers, the police today entered a tenement walkup at 2185 Lincoln Avenue and discovered the body of an elderly woman who had apparently starved to death. The body, incredibly emaciated, was seated in a broken rocking chair in which the woman had evidently died. There is some mystery surrounding the woman's identity. According to city records, the building is owned by an Arthur Benson, having been puchased four years ago by Benson from the Gordon Realty Company. The owner, as yet, has not been—'"

"Benson—Benson. I know that name. For a while I thought I was Arthur Benson. For no reason at all I gave that as my name when the police found me."

"No reason? You must have had a reason. Try to think."

Marco's forehead creased and beads of perspiration appeared. "I think—I think it was because—oh, I don't know. I only know Arthur Benson is a part of this nightmare!"

April Higgins brushed the moisture from his forehead—did it with a semblance of tenderness. "Never mind. Don't try too hard. Maybe it will come naturally."

"What else does it say?"

"Not much. The woman's body was removed to Hardy's undertaking parlor nearby pending identification—"

Marco's mind had slipped off in another direction. "I didn't tell you what happened at the hospital."

The girl put the paper down, waited.

"A man came in and tried to kill me."

"In the *hospital?*"

"That's why I ran away. This man came to my room dressed in an or-

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derly's suit. He looked familiar. I felt I should know exactly who he was—his name—and why he had come to kill me."

"Your knowing he meant to murder you—that came the way all the other things came to you? For no apparent reason?"

"Yes. But he wanted some information first. He asked me questions."

"What did he want to find out?"

"If I knew Arthur Benson. If I gave him data on nuclear physics. If I knew a Nadine Kildane—a Karl Boorman. Something called the Boorman Vibration with a code number OX49B."

April Higgins was pressing his hand tightly. "About the data on nuclear physics—what was your answer?"

"I TOLD HIM the truth. I've never given away any such information, although it's coming to me rather vaguely that I once had something to do with physics."

"Of course you did. Marco Lee is one of the greatest physicists of our time, and that's—you."

He looked at her, trying to comprehend.

She started to speak, then hesitated and bit her lips. "There's—there's something that came to my mind—"

"What is it?"

"An association of ideas, maybe you'd call it. Marco Lee, a nuclear physicist. A series of puzzles that begin at a mailbox. Maybe it's only coincidence, but why do you suppose Marco Lee drove his car up to a mailbox and got out? *You're sure you don't remember mailing anything?*"

Marco sat silent for a long minute before he said, "No, I don't remember it, but I have a feeling we can take it as an established fact. The coincidence is—too much."

"Maybe after a while you'll remember what you mailed and to whom. But let's go on with the other questions. What about Nadine Kildane?"

"That's the name of the woman found dead in the apartment on Lincoln Avenue."

"And Karl Boorman?"

"That's not so simple. I know the name. It was familiar the moment he spoke it. And the Boorman Vibration he asked about is in the box I hid. But who Boorman was—what the vibration is and why I went after it—"

April Higgins felt the trembling of weakness as Marco swayed against her. "You've done enough thinking for a while. Lie back on the bed while I make some tea. We've got to take this a little at a time."

Marco closed his eyes and dropped back wearily, while April crossed the room and opened a cupboard at the far corner. But she had scarcely touched the handle of the teapot when—

"April!"

There was stark urgency in the voice. She whirled to see Marco sitting bolt upright, his eyes wide and staring. She hurried to his side. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"That newspaper story you were reading—at the end—the last thing you said."

Slightly confused, April picked up the paper, but only to have Marco snatch it from her hands. "Where is it—the article?"

"There on the front page. What's so important about it?"

Marco was reading: " 'The woman's body was removed to Hardy's undertaking parlor, pending—' April! *I've got to get that body!*"

"But Marco! That's absurd! What on earth do you want with—"

"I don't know! But it's got to be taken out of there. What if they'd do

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something to it?"

"I don't understand you."

"Embalm it—ruin it!"

April sat down by his side and placed a hand on his arm. "Marco—calm down. You're all excited and overwrought. Try to collect yourself and tell me what this is all about."

MARCO RUBBED a hand across his forehead. Then he pressed it against his eyes as though they weren't functioning properly.

"That's better. Now tell me why you must have the woman's body. Let's straighten it out together."

"I don't know— I don't know. It's just that it has to be done. Nothing must happen to that body. If they put embalming fluid into it—kill it completely—"

"You mean the woman wasn't dead?"

"Maybe that's it—maybe she wasn't."

"Marco—now you're talking sheer foolishness. The police would know. They never take chances on things like that."

"Regardless— I've got to get that body to a safe place!"

Marco got up and started for the door. April, caught by surprise, rushed across the room and got to him before he'd opened it. "Marco—stop! You just told me someone is after you—trying to kill you. You can't go out there."

"I've got to get that body."

Desperately, April searched her mind for persuasive arguments. "All right. You have to get the body. But you can't do it alone. Go to the police, Marco. Tell them your story. They'll help you."

Marco frowned. "Sure they will—right into a padded cell. April—don't you understand? Everything I've told you is grounds for a decree of insanity. Nobody on earth would think me sane. Even—" he took her by the shoulders. "April—do you think I'm crazy?"

She looked at him for a long time. And as they stood there close together a bond, a spell was born between them. April raised her lips. Marco drew her close and the kiss was as natural, as right and foreordained as the sunrise.

Slowly she drew back. There were bright tears in her eyes. "No, Marco," she whispered. "I know you aren't insane. There's something wrong somewhere, but it isn't in your mind."

"Why do you say that with such certainty? How can you know?"

"Because I love you. That must be it. And when a woman loves a man she sees things very clearly, darling. I could lie to the police, the doctors, anyone—but I couldn't lie to you or to myself. Some terrible thing we don't understand is hanging over you, and we must find out what it is."

He buried his head in her bosom and sobbed in a surge of either thanksgiving or weakness. "But how can we find out? We have nothing to go on. We're lost in a thick woods."

"No, my darling. We aren't. One thing is very clear in my mind. The answer lies somewhere and no one can help us. We must find it ourselves."

"But what do we do? Where do we start?"

"We have more to go on than you realize. You're just tired from fighting it all alone, Marco. From now on we fight together. We'll see where your instincts lead."

"You mean—?"

"Something told you to go after that box. You went after it and found it. Whatever force is guiding you, put the names of certain people into your mind, and those people were real. They actually exist. Therefore this instinct or power—call it what you like—has some basis of truth."

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"But why should I feel a desperate urge to remove a dead body from an undertaking parlor?"

"I don't know, but somehow I'm certain you must follow through—*we* must follow through."

HE PUSHED her away at arm's length. "No, April—no. I'm not going to drag you into this. I've got to do it myself. If I get into trouble—"

"—I'd die wondering what had happened to you. I'm going, Marco. You can't get rid of me—" she smiled up at him "—ever, from now on."

He stood motionless for a long time. "I've got to get that body," he repeated finally.

"Then we'll see what can be done. Wait until I dress."

She crossed to the dressing table and flung off her dressing gown; then she stopped, turned to face him, and a blush covered her face and shoulders. "You'd—better look the other way. "I'm no prude, but it will take a little while to get used to—"

Marco turned and faced the door. While she dressed, April continued asking questions. "Do you have any idea where we can find this Arthur Benson?"

"None whatever."

April looked up, puzzled, from pulling a sheer stocking over a long, smooth leg. "You knew where the Boorman vibration was. You knew where the woman was—"

"Wait! I do know. The place he lives is as familiar to me as—as this room."

"Then maybe we should go there first."

"It might take a long time. I wandered over town for three days before I found Nadine Kildane. Knowing what Benson's home looks like doesn't necessarily give me its location."

April gartered her hose and reached for a pair of pink panties. "Don't—don't look, please. Not yet."

Marco Lee had turned half about. He resumed his original position and said, "The body is the most important thing. That's got to be taken care of above all else or—"

"Or what?"

"I—I don't know exactly. But I'm sure something terrible will happen. We've got to—"

"Wait! Quiet!" April suddenly forgot her dressing and went to the window. In the night-quiet, a sound, a hollow echo had reached her ears. She peeked around the drawn shade and then motioned to Marco. He crossed the room and put his eye beside hers.

"That's him. His name is Norshi. He must have seen me enter the building. He's waiting."

"He can keep right on waiting, unless there's another one out back. We can go down the fire escape and get my car out of the garage."

"Good. Let's hurry." Marco crossed the room and waited by the rear window while April swiftly got ready for the street. And while he stood there, the weird transformation came again. He straightened until he seemed taller than he actually was. His expression changed as his mind swung into a new groove and he took on a different personality.

His eyes, charged with a certain slyness, studied April covertly as she drew on her slip, skirt and blouse. His mouth twisted in a smile and he fingered at his upper lip as though preening a mustache. He took one step toward the oblivious girl.

Then came revulsion, his look of bewilderment at the alien thoughts he had savored—the rotten thoughts. Marco turned to face the window. He pressed his forehead against the cool pane.

Things like that happening to me. I don't understand. Haven't I any

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control over myself? Is my will power gone? Am I actually insane?

"Are you all right, darling?"

"Yes—yes, I'm all right." And with sudden, fierce possessiveness, Marco took April in his arms and kissed her. His lips slid away from her mouth, across her cheek, until he was whispering huskily into her ear. "April! April, I need you so much. Don't ever leave me. Not ever, darling!"

April laughed and deliberately forced a light tone. "Whew! What a kiss! You're just about the normalest man in town, Mr. Marco Lee! Let's be on our way. It's time to go steal a body."

CARP HAGERTY looked at his watch and was happy to find the hands pointing to one A.M. Lunch time. Old Carp smacked his lips in anticipation. He was seventy years old and was glad of this night-watchman's job in Hardy's undertaking parlors, because it gave him the money with which to have a fine lunch every night.

He hurried rearward to the receiving room, where he took from his locker two components of the meal—a pint of reasonable but excellent California wine, and a very small, thin cheese sandwich on white bread. Eyeing them with relish, he turned away to enter the cold storage vaults for the rest of his meal. He got it out of a drawer which, at the moment, did not happen to contain a body, but held two bottles of frosty cold beer.

He returned to the receiving room, sat down with a sigh of contentment and lined the lunch up in proper order. The wine, an appetizer; the sandwich, a hearty main course; and two bottles of beer, the ideal dessert for any meal. He expertly yanked the cork of the wine and had tilted the bottle to his lips when a sharp voice interrupted.

"Hold it, pop. I want a little service. You can eat later."

Carp Hagerty turned in wonder. He'd heard no one enter the room. He saw a tall, mustached, dark man in a black Homburg; a man worn and pale as though he'd gone through some continuing ordeal. "What'd you want? Nobody ain't allowed back here. Ring the bell out front. It connects in Hardy's bedroom upstairs."

"My business is with you. I've come for a body you've got here."

Carp Hagerty surveyed the man with but mild surprise. "Huh! This is a new one. They usually come in pairs. And they ain't usually as old as you. Kids mostly—and they ain't never wanted anything more than an identification tag or sometimes a piece of sheeting."

"What the hell you talking about?"

"Treasure hunters I think they call theirselves. Beats me how people can get fun out of this kind of thing. How come you figure I'd give you a corpse? That's going a little too far."

Carp Hagerty picked up the wine bottle again.

"I'm not fooling, pop," the dark man said. "I'm after the body of Nadine Kildane. It said in the papers you've got her here. Let's not fool around."

The old watchman glanced unconsciously toward the cold room from which he'd lately brought his beer. Then he reached for a gun on his hip.

The dark man took a quick step forward.

"THIS IS it," Marco said. "Hardy's funeral home. You can pull into the alley beside it."

April Higgins swung the car across the Lincoln Avenue car tracks and into the narrow passage Marco indicated. "Look," she said. "Someone driving out the back."

Marco had also caught sight of the red tail lights turning the corner at the far end of the alley. "Somebody taking a short cut maybe."

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April stopped the car in front of the side entrance to the undertaking parlor. The door was open. Lights from the inside cut a yellow square across the alley pavements.

"That's funny," Marco said. "I'd hardly expected any activity at this time of night. You stay here. I'll be right back."

April didn't bother to protest, but when Marco entered the building, she was right behind him. When he stumbled over the body on the floor, she bumped into him.

"Good lord!" Marco bent down quickly, then straightened. "This man's been killed. That's a knife in his neck."

April turned pale. "We'd better get out of here. I don't like this at all."

"Wait a minute. That door that's open—" Marco ran across the room and disappeared from sight while April stood frozen, staring at the dead man.

In a moment Marco was back. "Somebody beat us to it. They already took Nadine Kildane away. Maybe that car just pulling out."

A flurry of footsteps and a third door opened to reveal a man in pajamas and a dressing gown. "What's all the racket? Cars pulling in and out! Who—my God!"

"Let's go," Marco snapped. "We can't do any good here."

In the shortest possible time, April Higgins had the car rolling. They rounded the corner at the far end of the alley with the shouts of the pajama-clad figure sounding behind them.

"Where do we go now?" April asked.

"I don't know. Do you suppose he got our number?"

"If not it was because he was too excited. He had plenty of time."

"Just keep driving while I think. It will take a while for the squad car to answer the call."

"But why are we running? We didn't kill anybody. Maybe we should go back."

"We'd have a hard time proving we didn't. We were seen standing over the corpse after breaking in the dead of night."

"But we didn't break in. The door was open. And besides, the body of Nadine Kildane was gone. That shows someone else was there. We can prove we haven't got it."

"Not now we can't. It's too late. Keep driving while I think."

THEY TRAVELED west on Lincoln Avenue and then cut north on Halsted to Fullerton. Two dozen blocks of absolute silence with April glancing back at intervals looking for signs of a squad car.

At Western Avenue, Marco said, "Pull up."

April did so. "Now what? Do we leave the car and take a cab? I think that would be foolish. They'd—"

"No. We turn around and drive back."

April seemed relieved. "I'm glad you've come to your senses, darling. It's always better to face things than to run away."

"Not back to the undertaking parlor."

"Then where?"

"Somewhere near that hovel on Lincoln Avenue where I found the box."

"But why are we going back there?"

"I know where there's another body."

April Higgins had striven to keep up with Marco, but she was finding it a trifle difficult. Fortunate indeed that she had the blind faith of true love. "Darling, I'm a little bewildered. I'm trying hard but—well, could you make it clearer?"

Marco turned contritely and took

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her in his arms. "I'm sorry, April. All this must sound as though I'm insane—"

She kissed him fiercely. "Don't say that! Don't ever say it again. It's not that I doubt you. You're just so—so full of surprises. I'll go with you to find a dozen bodies. We'll work all night gathering them up, but couldn't you tell me a little more—"

"I don't *know* any more. That's the trouble. That's what's driving me crazy. I was riding along trying to figure out what to do next and there it was—clear and sharp in my mind for an instant. Then it got vague, but I've got to follow it up."

"Something about a body? But whose?"

"I don't know. But I'm sure I can find it. I—I feel almost as though I'd killed the person and hidden it myself."

"That's not possible, darling. You couldn't kill anyone!"

"Let's not be too sure until we know," Marco said grimly.

April swung right at the next intersection. "I hope it doesn't take us three days."

The whine of a siren bloomed up ahead of them. April flashed a white face at Marco. "Shall I turn off?"

"Too late! Keep driving straight ahead. But don't speed."

Two headlights bore down on them as the crescendo of the siren mounted. The squad car flashed by, went through a red light behind them and swung around a corner. They breathed sighs of relief in unison.

"They weren't after us," Marco said.

"Let's not be too sure. They may be back."

They cut into Lincoln and went diagonally—past the car barns—past Halsted Street and Geneva Terrace, after which April made a two-block detour to avoid passing Hardy's undertaking parlor.

"This is mighty dangerous business if you don't want the police to stop us. We're practically walking into their hands."

"I know, but we've got to chance it. Pull into that alley. You'll come to a vacant lot away from the street lights. Park there and we'll walk back half a block."

THEY WERE fortunate in that no rays from the street lamps penetrated the alley. Pitch darkness covered their movements as they picked slowly along the alley toward their destination.

Marco finally lit a match in order to locate the tumbledown building in which he'd originally found the wasted body of Nadine Kildane. "This way," he whispered.

April followed him into the areaway and through the door to the furnace room. "You can never find a body—or anything else—in here." This was true. The darkness was thick enough to cut.

"Everything seems quiet. I'll light another match. Look for a light switch."

They found a bulb hanging from the ceiling in front of the furnace. It threw a dim, smoky light and Marco hoped there was enough soot on the windows to keep much of it from seeping through.

"Wait here," he said. He went up the iron ladder over the boiler and down the far side. In a few moments he returned carrying the strange metal block he had hidden. He wiped off the dirt and the cube glowed silverly bright in his hands.

"Hold this. It's very light. I think we'll take it with us."

April took the box in gingerly hands. "I—is it dangerous?"

"I don't think so." Marco was busy

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exploring the basement. "Somewhere here—I'm sure of it. There is a picture in my mind of someone digging into soft earth—"

He stopped talking, then went to his hands and knees and began pulling loose bricks from the wall. This operation uncovered a sizable opening in a comparatively short time. He crawled inside and began digging with his hands into the dirt floor while April crouched down and peered in after him.

"There's a shovel out here if you want it."

"Hand it in."

Marco made good progress with the proper implement. A few silent minutes passed after which April's gasp sounded sharply in the furnace room.

"You were right! Do you know who he is?"

"Wait until I get him uncovered. Maybe—"

April's scream cut him off. Then a gruff voice filled the place. "Okay. Let's not have no trouble now. I got you cold. What in hell—"

Marco moved swiftly. He came out of the brick opening like an avenging demon. The huge janitor had April in his clutches, holding her firmly in a manner that made Marco see red. He hit the surprised janitor with a fury that set the latter back on his heels and opened him wide for enough devastating judo blows to send him writhing to the floor.

"Come on! We've got to get out of here!"

Marco snatched up the box from where April had dropped it and they made for the door. But only to step into the bright oval of a flashlight as they ran into the alley.

"Okay, this is the police!" a voice barked. "What's going on here?"

Marco swooped and came up with a small chip from a paving block. He threw it in a sweeping motion—threw it accurately—and the light went out to the accomplishment of tinkling glass from the smashed crystal and bulb.

THERE WAS a curse and the flash of an exploding gun as April and Marco pounded away down the alley. Angry voices behind them.

"Joe—bring another light. They're getting away."

"Quit firing that gun, you lame-brain! You'll hit somebody." A gruff voice this—rearward.

"That's what I'm trying to do."

"Yeah, but who? Cut it out! The call said they was in a basement. Look and see if you can find which one."

"They came out of the basement. They ran up the alley."

There was a whoop, a curse, and the crash of disturbed metal as someone went headlong over a garbage can. These sounds had scarcely died out as April pushed the starter and sent the car into motion. They made a getaway through the vacant lot and into the street beyond, and headed down Sheffield Avenue until they came to an intersection.

April continued turning corners for fifteen minutes, heading always in the same general direction until several miles stood between them and the alley on Lincoln Avenue. Then she pulled the car to the curb and stopped. She passed a weary hand over her forehead.

"We're doing all right," she said. "When we started out we only had one man trying to kill you. Now he's on one side and the police are on the other. We're in the middle and I'm tired enough to cry."

Marco took her in his arms. "I'm sorry, darling. I had no right to bring you into this. I should have had more sense."

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere

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else. If you kiss me I think it will help a little."

Afterward she nestled close to him and sighed. "Anyhow, I'm in it now and we've got to stay together whatever happens. Any suggestions?"

He stroked her hair tenderly. "You're about ready to collapse yourself. You're just out of a hospital, you know. Let's go back to my apartment."

"We can't do that."

"Why not? If that man's still waiting, we can slip up the back."

"It's not him I'm thinking of. It's the police. If that man at the undertaking parlor got your license number they'll—"

"Of course. I forgot about that."

"Hey! You two in there."

THEY STIFFENED and at that moment gave up the fight. This was it. They'd been caught. After all, who were they to get away from the police? Just a couple of amateurs.

"Yes, officer."

"Do your smooching on somebody else's beat. Me—I don't mind it, but not on my beat. If you can get away with it some place else, okay."

Marco wanted to laugh. He squeezed April, limp now in his arms, and she disengaged herself. "We were just leaving, officer. Good night."

"Good night to you."

They drove in silence for a few blocks. Then Marco said, "There's only one answer."

"What's that?"

"A hotel."

At the end of the next block, April asked, "Do you know one that would let us in? We haven't any baggage."

"We can try. Tell them we're suburbanites and missed our train. Keep driving. We'll watch for a likely looking place."

Nothing was said until April spoke up several blocks further on. "Darling."

"What?"

"Wouldn't it be nice?"

"Wouldn't what be nice?"

"To be suburbanites. I'll bet we wouldn't miss our train, though. We'd be on the first one going out." She stepped on the brake to slow the car. "Look—there's a hotel sign ahead of us. What do you think?"

"Let's try it. We'll park the car on down about three blocks and walk back."

There was no trouble at the desk. The clerk had gone to sleep over a magazine. He blinked, got up from his chair, and acted as though dishevelled couples without baggage dropped in every few minutes.

"Double?"

"Yes."

"Bath?"

"Y-yes."

The clerk eyed them with calculation. "Twelve dollars—in advance."

April was on the point of protesting, but Marco pressed her hand and laid a twenty-dollar bill on the desk.

"Sign the register."

Marco took the pen as though it had lately come out of a furnace. He glanced at April, then saw the casual smirch on the clerk's face. "Mr. & Mrs. John Smith."

The clerk grinned. "You'll feel right at home, folks. We got a lot of Smiths here. Maybe it's a convention."

"Our key, please."

"Sure. Room 618. You'll have to go up yourself. No bellhops after one."

IT WAS with distinct relief that they passed beyond range of the clerk's leering eyes. But then the leering business was taken up by the elevator man who leered from the first to the sixth and then opened the door and said, "Good night, folks. Sleep well." with an inflection of hidden laughter.

Walking down the hall, Marco grumbled, "Wouldn't you think people

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working in a place like this would get used to—sin?"

"Marco! Please."

"I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean that."

She smiled at him. "It's all right. We're—we're different. Besides, this isn't from choice."

The room was a typically ratty nook that was in perfect keeping with the tenor of the hotel. And strangely, once inside, the awkwardness fell away from them.

"I'd sell my soul for a hot bath," April sighed.

"The bathroom's yours. In the meantime, I want to look over this box."

Marco took the metal case, cleared the telephone table and set it thereon. He seemed to forget about April as he drew up a chair and began searching the box for a hidden spring lock.

April looked at him uncertainly for a moment and then went into the bathroom. She turned on the light, closed the door and locked it.

Then, after a few moments, she unlocked it again, very quietly, as though she had committed an act of distrust. She opened the door and peeked out at Marco. He seemed entirely oblivious of everything except the box. As though reaching a compromise, she left the door open a scant inch and turned on the water. In a short time, waves of steam were sifting out around the door.

Half an hour later a clean but slightly frightened April peered again into the room. All was quiet. She opened the door and tiptoed toward the bed. Then she threw caution to the winds and dived in. Marco turned in surprise to see creamy skin disappearing under the covers.

"The bathroom's clear."

Marco looked vaguely at the bed, then at the open bathroom. "Oh—yes, of course. You go to sleep. This box is interesting—very interesting."

"Aren't—aren't you going to kiss me good night?"

"Oh, certainly. Be right there. Just a moment."

April waited. Marco did not move. In less than sixty seconds, April was asleep.

APRIL OPENED her eyes to bright daylight pouring in the window. She blinked, yawned and looked around. Marco sat hunched over the telephone table. Before him lay a heap of electronic parts: wires, rheostats; tiny vaccuum tubes; odd-looking silver and platinum gadgets.

"Marco! For heaven's sake!"

Marco started. "Oh, yes, dear. I'm sorry. Just a moment."

"Just a moment *what?*"

"You wanted me to kiss you good night. I'll be right there."

"That was hours ago. It must be noon by now. Have you been sitting there ever since we came in?"

Marco looked around in genuine surprise. "Noon? So it is. Sorry, darling. I got interested in this machine. It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen!"

Marco turned back to his work and April got slowly out of bed and put on her clothing. For all the attention Marco paid, she could have been a dress dummy getting ready for a session in a store window.

Slightly bemused, April pondered her future. *I wonder what it will be like on our honeymoon? That is, if if there is a honeymoon. I'll have to see that there aren't any gadgets around.*

Noting her watch had stopped, she snapped on the bedside radio. Dreamy music, entirely out of keeping with the time of day, floated into the room.

Marco did not appear to hear the

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music. April crossed the room and peered over his shoulder. He glanced up at her and smiled. "Did you have your bath yet, darling?"

"Last night, angel. Have you learned anything about that—gadget?"

Marco's bloodshot eyes brightened. "It's—well, colossal is the word. And one thing is certain: Whoever built it had to formulate at least three completely new systems of mathematics in order to project the theory into practical application. A really stupendous brain was behind this."

April gently stroked his hair. "And from what I've heard, you aren't exactly a slouch at that sort of thing yourself."

"I get by, but beside this genius I'm in kindergarten."

"What is it? Some kind of a radio?"

"NO—NOT a radio. In fact, I don't know what it's for. I can follow the principals of construction to a great extent, but the theory of application escapes me at the moment. I'm sure, however, that it was built to control and direct a rate of vibration far higher than any we know of—or rather, that we've isolated and controlled. We know the higher rates exist, of course. Mathematically we can prove their existence clear beyond the infinite, but capturing and controlling them is another matter."

"It sounds very complicated."

"No—it's very simple, basically—the theory, that is. But the inventor of this unit has achieved control of a vibration which could easily be higher than the highest one we know of."

"What is the highest one we—you know of?"

"The wave length, or vibration, of the human brain. That's in the ultrasonic theoretical bands, of course."

April played with his tousled hair. "That's a nice band too," she said, and her eyes grew dreamy.

"What band, darling?"

"The one playing now. Nice languorous rhythm."

Marco looked around in bewilderment. "Oh—the music. Of course."

"But you were saying—"

Marco did not reply immediately. He reattached several parts in their proper places and stared at the resulting hookup. "This unit could easily be for lethal purposes."

"You mean it could kill people? Then you'd better leave it alone, darling. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you. We've got enough trouble with the police and that man in front of the house."

Marco pointed to the complicated maze within the box. "You see, it controls and measures a vibration which would not even register on known recording instruments. Therefore, it has to direct the vibratory force also. Otherwise there'd be no reason for its existence."

"This must be the Boorman vibration you've talked about."

"It is. I've traced out the code translations 0X49B. But Boorman—whoever he is—doesn't give much away. His code stops short of complete in the primary cycles—short by at least seven levels."

"You mean there aren't enough letters and numbers in the code."

"Yes. With the machine and his five indicators, I can reconstruct up to a certain point. In fact I could reconstruct the whole code if I had access to his mathematical systems. But I haven't. In order to solve this thing I'd have to devise mathematical systems of my own based upon the projected theory."

"That would take a while, wouldn't it?"

"At least five years—if I was lucky."

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"Then we'll have to wait. I'm getting hungry and you—"

APRIL SUDDENLY clutched Marco's hand. The music had stopped and a newscaster's voice had taken its place.

"Listen," April said tensely.

"—piled on mystery today in the Lincoln Avenue starvation case when a second body was found—that of a man later identified as Karl Boorman—"

"Of course, Boorman," Marco exclaimed. "Who else? I should have known."

"Why should you have known?"

"Sssh. Listen."

"—fantastic aspects when a janitor reported prowlers in a furnace room next door to the building in which the woman's body was recently found. The police answered the call and almost apprehended a man and woman who fled from the scene after beating the janitor into insensibility. The woman was unknown, but the man was tentatively identified as Marco Lee, the nuclear scientist who vanished recently under mysterious circumstances. It was later that police found the body of Boorman. It had been secreted behind a brick wall in the furnace room.

"The janitor was questioned by the police but was cleared when they became satisfied that he knew nothing whatever about Boorman's body or the prowlers.

"Meantime, the body of the unidentified woman which was reported as stolen from Hardy's undertaking parlor has not been found. The police are utterly bewildered by this strange series of events. They believe the theft of the woman's body, the body of Karl Boorman, and the unapprehended prowlers are tied together somehow, but they are unable to find any clues. However, they promise the usual speedy solution of the case."

The music was resumed and April silenced it by snapping the switch. "Marco, I think you ought to go to the police."

Marco seemed occupied with other thoughts. "They missed some details—did you notice?"

"Yes, but maybe that was because of the time element. To tell the whole story would take all afternoon."

"But they didn't mention us as being seen at the undertaking parlor."

"That's right, but it would be important only if that watchman had been killed. He wasn't mentioned either, so maybe we aren't murder suspects. Maybe he didn't die."

"Let's hope not. But I don't want to go to the police yet."

"Then what will we do?"

"Get something to eat. You said you were hungry. Do you suppose they have room service in this flea circus?"

"We can find out."

April crossed to the phone and picked up the receiver. But she put it down again as a sharp knock sounded on the door. April froze, then turned slowly, wide-eyed. Marco was again engrossed with the loose components of the machine.

"Marco! Somebody at—at the door."

"Yes, darling—I heard," Marco replied vaguely. "Let them in."

"But, Marco! Maybe it's—"

Marco jerked erect. "Knock? Door? Oh, good lord! It could be—"

The knock came again. Marco shrugged. "We've got to open it. They know we're here. Otherwise they'll get a key or—"

"Who is it?" April called.

Came the muffled reply: "Room service. Your dinner."

They stared at each other in consternation. "But we didn't order any dinner," Marco said.

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"The slip says room 618. Name's Smith."

Marco went over and turned the knob.

A figure in a white coat carrying a large tray came into the room. "Where do you want this?"

Marco and April found nothing to say.

"Come on! Come on! It's heavy. I can't stand here holding it all day."

Marco bestirred himself and cleared the dresser. The man put the tray down and flexed his arms. He looked about the room and showed interest at what he saw on the telephone table. "Fixing the radio?" he asked cheerfully.

Marco stepped to the left so that he partially shielded the table from the man's eyes. "What do I owe you?"

"Not a thing. Compliments of the hotel or something like that. Eat hearty."

THE MAN left, whistling a catchy little tune as he closed the door.

Marco stared at the food, turned to look at April, found her staring also. "What do you think? Should we eat it? Maybe—"

"I'm too hungry to worry about it. It will be just as easy to wonder about empty dishes as full ones, and I'm hungry. I feel as though I'd never eaten in my life."

"I could do with a snack myself," Marco said.

Later, looking at the empty dishes, Marco said, "Do you feel all right?"

"Better than I've felt for a long time. Why do you ask?"

"I was thinking of that man Norshi who was trying to kill me. It occurred to me he might have sent in some poisoned food."

April turned pale. "*Now* you mention it!"

Marco made a deprecating gesture. "The chances were all against it. He didn't look like a man who would be capable of such finesse."

April put a spoon into the sugar, frowned and dug in with a finger. She brought out a small, folded bit of paper. "Look, Marco—a note."

"An advertisement probably. What does it say?"

"It says: 'They've found your car. Better leave in the opposite direction—and quick. Good luck.' There is no signature."

Marco scratched his ear thoughtfully. "It looks as though we've got somebody on our side. That's a novelty. But why so mysterious, I wonder. Why didn't he come and warn us in person?"

"It's enough just now that he warned us. Let's get out of here."

They went swiftly about the business of evacuating the room. Soon they were ready to go. But Marco, as he opened the door with his precious aluminum box under his arm, went suddenly pale. He clutched the knob for support.

April came forward quickly. Marco looked at her and managed a weak smile. He said, "Maybe—maybe there *was* something wrong with that food. Where do you feel bad?"

SIMTON PAINE had brought his smelly bulldog pipe into play. It was fogging Sam Spaulding's office and the police captain didn't like it. But he forebore any mention of the subject and Simton probably thought the captain's scowl was from habit.

"There is quite a little on this case I haven't given you," Paine said casually.

Spaulding's scowl deepened. "Well, that's just dandy, friend. We're working our ears off on it, but I wouldn't want you to give away any secrets."

"It concerns this man Boorman," Paine went on, entirely unperturbed.

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"The so-called 'mystery man'. He's not exactly a mystery to us."

Spaulding's genuine interest kept him from digressing into sarcasm, and Paine said, "Boorman was a genius of immense stature, but the public knew little about him. He was a 'scientist's scientist', so to speak, and I've heard him mentioned in the same breath with Einstein.

"He had a rather sad mental distortion, however—a persecution complex coupled with an egoist abnormality that made him impossible to deal with on government projects. He screamed that the government only wanted to milk his brain and he guarded his discoveries and inventions like a snarling dog guarding a bone."

"If he had something of value to the government, I'd think—"

Simton Paine was ahead of Spaulding. "This is the U. S. A., Captain—not the U. S. S. R."

"I didn't say—"

"Of course you didn't." Paine's eyes narrowed in thought. "Boorman was a close-mouthed, cagey devil. He was working on a fabulous piece of mechanism he kept so top-secret even the government knew little about it. Some sort of a control of vibrations existing even above the ultra high frequencies we know about. So far as we could gather it would have functioned as a mind-scanner. Sort of a super lie detector that worked on the principal of tuning into the wave length of the human mind."

Simton glanced at Spaulding. "You know of course that every individual brain has a wave length of its own."

"Sure." There was a touch of sarcasm in the tone; sarcasm Paine ignored.

"We've wondered if the machine couldn't have been used for something else. Something downright dangerous."

"So that's why you've had government men snooping all over hell's half-acre. You might have gotten further by letting us in on it—cooperating."

Paine sighed. "Maybe you're right. But as I said, it's so damn hush-hush. We work under orders, too, and sometimes Washington makes mistakes even though they never admit it."

Spaulding seemed somewhat mollified. "Who do you think killed Boorman?"

Paine evaded. "Having some insight into his personality, I can see where he might do stupid, childish things. Boorman could have been a pushover for a woman—the slick, sin-loaded variety—a really smart one, that is."

"The only woman we've found in this case was the old bag that starved to death on Lincoln Avenue. If he fell for her—"

"I don't think he did, but one thing is certain—we've got to locate that machine of Boorman's before someone else does."

SPAULDING leveled a look at the Federal man. "You know more about this Marco Lee than I do. Do you think he went crooked?"

Simton pondered. "He's not beyond suspicion, even though his background is of the finest. His later actions are difficult to coordinate. I don't think he's a murderer, however."

"We know he's a would-be body snatcher."

"That's the angle that has me guessing. It must tie in some way with Boorman's vibration control."

Spaulding was a type that could never be completely friendly, at least not with Simton Paine. "Any orders from Washington?" he asked with the old sarcasm.

"Yes. Get the Boorman machine. Find out why Marco Lee went haywire. Solve the Boorman murder to

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find out if it had any international aspects. After that we can get a little sleep."

Simton Paine got up to leave. He walked as far as the door and then turned back. "Oh yes. I wonder if you'd pick up a couple of characters named Greshman and Norshi. Washington will give you the dope on them. One of my men spotted them in a hotel lobby downtown and I'd like to ask them a few questions."

"Delighted to serve," Spaulding said dryly.

The Federal man came slowly back to the desk. "I understand your resentment. I'd be resentful myself in your place, and maybe I haven't given you all the law allows. The truth is, I don't suspect that Boorman was involved with a woman at all. I know it. A siren named Nadine Kildane was the one who turned him against the Federal people. A very clever gal who knew a good thing when she had it."

Spaulding's eyes widened. "You said a siren. Are you kidding? That wreck we found—"

"—wasn't Nadine Kildane. Your identification was only tentative. You know that yourself."

"We're still checking," Spaulding said by way of defense.

"Of course. In time you'll find out who she really was. When you do I'd like the information."

"What about this guy Benson? Know anything about him?"

"Nothing at all."

"We've really no proof there's anything out of the way about him except he owned the dump on Lincoln avenue and we can't lay our hands on him. Maybe he's not connected at all."

"I have a feeling he is, but it's just a hunch. I'm going to run along now. If you turn up Marco Lee, give me a ring at the hotel."

"Okay."

Simton Paine went out and closed the door, leaving Sam Spaulding with the idea there was far more in the Federal man's head than he'd given out.

Spaulding scowled.

APRIL WAS watching Marco Lee with great concern. She sat beside him in a cab, partially supporting him as they went diagonally across town toward her apartment. She said, "Try to hold on. It's just a little further."

Marco, pale as a ghost, gritted his teeth and tried to hang on. "We shouldn't go to your apartment. It's probably being watched."

She took his hand in hers, found it icy. "Marco, lets go to the police. You're no criminal. What if they do know we were in the undertaking parlor? It can be explained. And you're sick!—You need attention."

He shook his head stubbornly. "Not yet. I want to do more work on this mechanism. It's—it's the most fantastic thing I've ever run onto. Besides, I'm beginning to remember things."

"What things, darling?"

"About the mailbox—and before. I mailed something, April."

"Something important?"

Marco laid his head back on the upholstery and closed his eyes. "Vital government information. Atomic data I put into a little black book."

"Who did you mail it to?"

"A man named Benson, but I don't know why."

"Did you—get paid for it?"

"No—no. Nothing like that. Somehow I have a vague recollection I thought I *was* Benson." He shuddered. "Oh. I don't know! It's all mixed up, but I can't go to the police yet. I've got to know more of what this is all about. Maybe I've gone insane!"

"No, darling! No. Don't say that. You're just sick. We'll go to the apart-

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ment and I'll lock the doors and you can get some rest. After all—you haven't slept for heaven knows how long."

"Maybe that's it. At least it wasn't the food or you'd be sick too."

The cab pulled up in front of April's building and they got out, Marco with the aluminum box under his arm. April paid the driver and the cab pulled away. She held Marco's arm as they climbed the steps, her attention centered upon him entirely. Marco was suffering a wave of nausea, so neither of them knew from whence Norshi materialized. But he was beside them, there on the porch by the door, his hand held in his pocket at a suspicious angle, a varnished smile on his face.

"Just a moment, please."

April moved by instinct—like a tigress protecting her young. The point of her right shoe connected sharply with Norshi's shin. He grunted, grimaced and bent slightly forward. One of April's red fingernails went neatly into his eye. He cursed. April's leg went out to hook around his ankle as she pushed him from the opposite side.

Norshi went headlong down the sharply-angled flight of steps. His head hit the walk with a thud.

WHEN HE got his consciousness back and picked a splitting headache up off the walk, April had herded her charge inside and they were both safe behind two locked doors. Norshi cursed and hobbled away on a sprained ankle.

Once inside, April helped Marco Lee remove his coat and drew him toward the bed. "First off, you're going to rest, darling. I'll play watchdog, so you've got nothing to worry about. Get into that bed."

Marco appeared to have gained some strength. He sat down on the edge of the bed with the box in his lap. He stared at it fixedly. "I've been doing some thinking," he said. "I'm beginning to get a vague idea of what this was used for. If I'm right it's—it's diabolical—devilish."

"And now to bed," April said firmly.

"I want to try an experiment first. It's the only way of checking some equations I've formulated."

"Later."

Marco looked at April. "No—I guess I'd better not. It might be dangerous. I've no right to subject you—"

She came and sat down beside him. "Never mind that. Would it help get you out of the mess you're in?"

"If I could really find out what this box is used for, I'd have something to go on."

"Will it take long?" She was scrutinizing his pallid face with concern.

"It shouldn't."

"Then let's get it over with. You probably wouldn't sleep anyhow—wondering about it."

Marco placed the box firmly upon his knees. "You draw up a chair in front of me. I want you to sit down and close your eyes and—and just do nothing at all."

April brought the chair and did as she was directed. She said, "Hurry, darling. I want you to get to bed."

"Now sit perfectly still, but if anything happens—anything that's upsetting at all, I want you to stop me."

Dead silence settled over the one-room apartment. April closed her eyes and the silence got louder and louder in her ears until it was like surf booming on a rocky short. The booming reached a crescendo, then faded to a soft whispering. But it was the whispering of demons. This she knew and she wanted to open her eyes—to reach out and bid Marco stop whatever he was doing. But she

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couldn't move; she couldn't open her eyes.

She was dreaming now—dreaming though wide awake and utterly terrified. It seemed as though two giant hands had reached into her head and were bent upon tearing her brain out by the roots. Stark phantasms flooded over her and she was alone in a land of hostile giants. She was running madly down a street—a somber street wrapped in a *House of Usher* mood. It was lined on one side by vast gloomy doorways into melancholy mansions, and in each doorway a giant was chained like a great watch-dog. Long arms—taloned hands—reached for her, but she knew the gauntlet must be run. She screamed soundlessly and all the giants slavered and laughed as their talons arced out.

Then the two great hands lifted her brain—whole and intact—from her head and held it up as a rare prize.

"Got it! Got it—got it—got—got—got—" were the words cried out in triumph, to dribble away on a bitter wind.

Then she knew no more.

APRIL CAME to on the bed with Marco bending over peering anxiously into her face. "April! Darling! Wake up—come out of it!"

She opened her eyes and smiled. "You called me darling. It was—it sounded nice."

"What happened?"

"I wanted to stop you but I couldn't raise my hand. I had horrible nightmares even while I was still awake." April covered her face with her hands. "It was awful. It seemed as though someone was lifting my brain out of my head."

Marco sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes vague with thought. "That could be it. I think I've stumbled onto the truth. I was a fool, though. I shouldn't have taken the chance because I obviously used it in the wrong manner and I could have injured you permanently."

"You think you know what the box is for?"

"I think so. I don't know the purpose Boorman had in mind originally, though it was probably meant as some sort of a truth machine. But it has been used for something different—something so dangerous it scares me."

April came to a sitting position. "You promised to rest after your experiment. Now lie down and close your eyes. Otherwise you're going to collapse."

"I think I will. There are a few sequences I want to work out. I can do it just as well lying down."

He stretched and April threw a blanket over him. She stood watching him, smiling tenderly. How, she wondered, could such helpless people be such geniuses? She didn't know, but she was warmly glad it was that way. She thought: *I don't think I could love an entirely self-sufficient genius. I'd feel so useless.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. Her heart jumped as she glanced quickly down at Marco. The breathing remained even; his eyelids did not quiver. He was asleep among his equations like a child among its toys.

April tiptoed to the bed and sat down quietly, her eyes on the door. She sat there hoping desperately the knock would not be repeated; that whoever it was would go away.

The knock came again. April did not move. The knock was patiently repeated at thirty-second intervals for several minutes. Finally April got up and went to the door.

"Who's there?"

"FBI."

"You can't come in. I'm—I'm not dressed."

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"That's all right. I'll wait 'til you are."

"But I'm taking a bath."

"I have plenty of time. You finish with your bath and then get dressed and I'll wait here for you."

"I'm getting ready for bed. I can't let you in—now or later."

"Are you alone?"

"Y-yes. That's why I won't let you in."

"I wish you'd reconsider. How about stepping out here—when you're dressed. Possibly you'd feel safer."

"If I do that will you go away?"

"After I've talked to you."

"All right. I'll be about ten minutes."

April went to the window and looked out. The street was deserted. The yellow lamps glowed lonely in the night. She went back to the bed and awakened Marco, holding her fingers over his lips.

WHEN HE opened his eyes, she whispered, "There's someone at the door, darling. We've got to get out of here. Do you feel able to make it?"

A short time later they crept down the fire escape; two bugs crawling down the cold brick side of a hostile cliff into a hostile world.

The last section of the fire escape squeaked as it swung downward against its weights. But no heads appeared. No one barred the way.

Deep in the alley shadows, Marco took April's hand. He squeezed it. "Things have gotten clearer somehow," he whispered. "This Benson. I think I can find his place. The apartment that is so familiar to me."

"You want to go there?"

"Yes. It's our next step."

"We'd better go this way and cut through the cross alley. We come out on Devon Place. Maybe we can get a cab there."

They moved through the darkness cut here and there by weak rays from the street lights. "Another thing," Marco said, clutching the aluminum box under his arm, "I think I know *why* Benson's apartment is familiar to me. This thing is beginning to unwind."

April was shivering. "I hope we don't meet that Oriental again. I'll bet he's pretty mad. I don't think he'd let me kick him in the shins a second time."

Marco was pondering. "That's one link I can't find; why Norshi wants to kill me."

"Maybe to get the box."

"I didn't have it when he tried in the hospital."

"There's a cab."

ARTHUR BENSON waited patiently for April to finish with her bath and get dressed. It did not occur to him that she was a deceitful wench, because two things got in the way of such an idea. Benson wasn't too brilliant mentally, being rather a dangerous schemer in the middle IQ brackets. Also, he was a lady's man and had the unconscious feeling that he charmed women even through locked doors.

While he waited for the door to open, he planned his moves. He would push inside quickly and, using the gun he carried as a threat, would repossess the Boorman invention he knew lay inside. He was not a killer and he knew it. If anyone died in the operation it would be by accident. He hoped there would be no casualties.

Norshi would again stalk Marco Lee—with a personal grudge next time—and Benson felt the Oriental would soon earn the black book. It surprised Benson that Marco had the Boorman invention. How Marco had gotten it, Benson couldn't imagine. To

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the best of his knowledge, it had been last in the possession of Nadine Kildane. Fortunately, Norshi had reported to him after getting kicked in the shins and had spoken of the box. Thus, Benson had been able to call the Oriental off temporarily and take up the trail himself. He certainly didn't want Norshi and Greshman to get an inkling of what the box really was.

Benson smiled as he shifted his position to lean his other shoulder on the door jamb. Poor Norshi. He certainly didn't know how to handle women. Imagine being knocked down a flight of stairs by one!

He took a cigarette from his pocket, lighted it, drew a deep draught. He was feeling much better now. His mind-power had returned completely; he was a whole entity, and the sickness—the panic sickness—of knowing he was partly in one skull while wisps of him remained in another, had faded away. Ruefully, he recalled his errors. The main one had been quitting Marco Lee's brain just there at the mail box. He should have waited a few more hours.

And the second was not realizing the return transition would be spotty; that enough memory stuff would adhere temporarily, long enough for Marco Lee—upon re-entering—to scan it and realize what had happened. Of course, under these circumstances, Lee had to die. This death would cost the whole stake involved, but Benson wasn't one to quibble when in danger. There would be other chances; other rich rewards.

Next time he'd handle the transposition himself. Kildane had bungled somehow. It was a touchy thing, that vibration control. And using it for a purpose for which it hadn't been intended made it doubly dangerous. Fortunately, he'd retrieved the buffer. When he got the box and returned her mentality, he'd send her on her way with a few dollars' remuneration.

ONLY ONE small fly in the ointment, really. The hoodlum he'd hired to retrieve the buffer had gotten trigger-happy—or was it knife-happy? The watchman at the undertaking parlor had been killed. Benson shrugged—snubbed out his cigarette against the wall, dropped it, and stepped on it. The hoodlum was far away now. He himself would never be implicated.

Benson frowned, turned to face the door, tapped on the panel. No answer. He tapped again. Could the dame have doublecrossed him? Impossible!

Soft footsteps sounded. Benson turned sharply to see a man walking toward him down the hall. Benson turned to face the door so the man couldn't see his face in passing.

But the man did not pass. He hove to beside Benson and said, "Nobody home?" He spoke pleasantly enough to allay any fears Benson may have had.

Benson smiled. "Guess not. Friends of mine. Just ran over. They must be out."

"Maybe they didn't hear you," the young man said. He had a bulldog pipe between his teeth. The tobacco was strong, its aroma pleasant or unpleasant depending on likes or dislikes.

"I've knocked several times." Benson began edging away, trying to appear nonchalant and not succeeding.

"Let's find out for sure," the young man said cheerfully. He whipped a ring of keys from his pocket, tried three with exceeding swiftness, and had the door open before Benson could collect his wits. "You first," he

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said politely, and urged Benson into the apartment.

The evidences of hasty departure stood out sharply. The open window, the general disarray of the premises. The young man puffed his pipe and looked at Benson. "Do you think your friends might have gone out the window?"

"Absurd." Benson turned toward the door. "And I don't like this. It smacks of housebreaking."

"It does at that," the young man said pleasantly. "Maybe we'd better go."

They walked out and down the hall side by side. Benson went down the stairs first, the hair on his neck crawling at the close proximity of the stranger. On the sidewalk, Benson said, "Well, I'll be running along. Nice meeting you."

"Yes, wasn't it? And, by the way, your friend Norshi is in jail. It seemed an appropriate place."

"*My* friend. I don't understand."

The other sucked at his pipe reflectively. "His partner Greshman is still moping about somewhere, however. You'll likely be able to get in touch with him."

The young man started off up the street, then turned and called brightly. "Or possibly he'll get in touch with you. Good night."

Benson stood gaping until he was alone under the street lamp. Or thought he was. A moment later something hard pressed into his back. "Good evening, friend." Greshman's heavy voice strove for lightness as it continued: "Talking with policemen these days? We must have words, you and I. Important words."

"THIS IS it," Marco Lee said. "The red brick on the left. The apartment we want is on the fourth floor. Number Forty-Seven."

"We'd better go up the back," April said. She clung to Marco's arm and shivered.

"I see no reason for that, except we might find the front door locked."

"I'm sure it would be locked."

"If it is, let's hope someone is at home."

"Aren't you afraid to just walk in? He may want to kill you. Norshi did."

Marco shook his head. "He wouldn't dare. I have an ace in the hole. Two aces, in fact. Small, but potent."

They were in the building now, and Marco had punched the button for the self-service elevator. They got in and signalled for their floor.

Number Forty-Seven was down the hall to the left. They came before it and stopped, seemingly a little appalled now at their previous courage. Then Marco raised a fist and knocked resolutely.

Nothing happened. Marco knocked again. "Guess Mr. Benson is out." He reached forth and tried the knob. The door opened silently to reveal a room in dim, half-light.

"It's open," April breathed, her voice marveling.

"Then we go in." Marco took April's hand and drew her along behind him as he crossed the threshold.

They found a richly furnished room with doors leading off, indicating there were at least five other rooms. "Mr. Benson lives well," Marco muttered. "And I know where he gets his money."

A wall switch was waiting to be pressed. Marco pressed it, then turned to close the door. Now they stood close together for a moment in silence.

"Are you looking for some particular thing?" April asked.

"Yes."

Marco moved forward now, after

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dropping April's hand. She remained by the door. Marco disappeared into what could have been a bedroom. He returned almost immediately, his face grim. "It's in there. If I wanted it—and I did—I figured Mr. Benson would want it also. But he probably had a better reason than I did. I didn't have any reason at all that I was conscious of."

"What on earth is it?"

April crossed the room, slipped past him and looked into the room beyond. A single quick glance and she drew back, her cheeks suddenly ashen. "A—a body."

"Of course. The old woman they found in the Lincoln Avenue tenement."

"But what does this Benson want of a dead body?"

"I don't think she's dead. I think—"

A NEW VOICE cut into the room, drowning their half-whispers. "All right. We've had enough clowning and pussyfooting. Let's get down to cases. Give me that box you stole."

She was a sleek, deeply-tanned cat in a tight black dress and she held a gun in her hand. She was very beautiful—the carefully varnished beauty with not a shining black hair out of place. One of those sirens who dripped enchanting sin all over the place.

Marco Lee looked at her and clutched the box in a tighter grip. "Nadine Kildane, I presume."

"Right, Stanley. The box."

April, looking for something to say, found it and said, "But you're making a mistake: His name isn't Stanley."

"Bright girl," the siren snapped.

Marco laid a protective arm over April's shoulder. "She's referring to a certain Dr. Livingston's partner, darling."

"A pair of Englishmen you wouldn't know about, honey." Nadine Kildane turned her sloe eyes back on Marco Lee. "Intellectually, you and I seem to be all alone in the room, bub. The box."

Marco Lee frowned. "I don't like people who parade extraneous and useless knowledge to the embarrassment of others," he said.

"A Boy Scout yet. I won't ask you again. The box."

"I don't think I care to give it to you."

Nadine Kildane pushed out a luscious lower lip. "Like that, eh? And me with a gun. You don't seem to know the rules, bub. When one points a gun at one, one is supposed to give one what one asks for—"

"I think not."

"—or one will blow a hole through one big enough to park a truck in."

"It doesn't necessarily follow."

"What doesn't follow what?"

"That you will shoot me if I don't give you the box. Holding a gun and using it for lethal purposes are two entirely different things. I'm inclined to think you're—"

"Not the type, eh?"

April through differently. "Give it to her, Marco. She's—she's dangerous."

THE LITTLE gun in Nadine Kildane's hand spat viciously. Its sound could have been the sound of a snapping stick; a dropped plate. Marco snatched at his right ear. Nadine said, "If you ever want to wear earrings, you won't have to bother having your left ear pierced. The box."

"You still haven't proven you're a potential murderess," Marco said, "but I'm willing to be reasonable. I'll trade you the box for some information."

"I think the answer is nix."

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Marco was holding a handkerchief to his ear. "My questions are purely academic. I won't pry into your theft of government secrets. I want to know about the box."

"What about it?"

"Boorman meant it as a truth-detecting device, did he not? As a sort of brain-scanner?"

Nadine shrugged. "Could be. He talked along those lines, but I wasn't interested."

"But you became interested when he talked along other lines."

Nadine Kildane was startled, but she hid it well. Her frown deepened. That was all. "What are you talking about?"

"You know very well. Only a genius could have created this instrument, but once it was created, a physicist of even mediocre abilities could trace the circuits and understand its possible uses."

Marco turned to April. "You see, darling, I got everything pretty well worked out when I dismantled the unit in the hotel room last night." He turned suddenly to Nadine Kildane. "You were the one who sent us the warning. You were on our trail."

"Certainly, stupid. I wanted the box, but you two were far too hot to touch. And the way you were wandering around like a pair of lost pups, I stuck around to steer you away from the law."

Now there came, simultaneously, two new elements upon the scene. The faint odor of strong shag tobacco and the lazy voice of Simton Paine. They both emanated from the outside corridor, the door opening slowly and silently. "The law was doing some steering too, Miss Kildane. With all os us trailing each other, we must have looked like a parade."

Nadine Kildane had stiffened. Now she came unfrozen and whirled with the gun coming around in a snub-nosed arc. And it was amazing how a man with such a lazy voice could move so swiftly.

Simton Paine traveled ten feet and almost got his fingers around the wrist of Nadine Kildane's gun arm. But not quite, and it seemed for a moment that the girl had him covered. But the government agent had evidently been in such spots before. He brushed the gun on by and closed with the girl.

ONLY NOW did Nadine Kildane seem to come really awake. She turned, without warning, into a snarling, ripping wildcat. Perhaps other women in her place would have been somewhat handicapped by a sense of modesty. Not Kildane. She carried the surprised agent to the floor. In a tangle of smooth nylon legs, flashing red claws, and picturesque language, Nadine Kildane gradually was brought under submission.

Simton Paine hauled her to her feet and pushed her onto an overstuffed lounge. He favored her with a look of exasperation and retrieved his pipe. He looked at Marco Lee. "You were saying—?"

"That the Boorman vibration control is an excellent instrument turned to base purposes."

Simton Paine sighed as he tamped tobacco into his pipe. "You geniuses are fine fellows, but you talk in circles. Let's have it straight out. One word after another. What was this crowd doing with that aluminum box?"

"The hell with that!" Nadine Kildane snarled, her eyes spitting sparks at the government agent. "How come you got so cute? Slew-footing around after me. If you had me spotted and wanted me, why didn't you come and take me like a man?"

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The agent's gaze was flatly abstract, impersonal. "I've been in this game long enough to trust my instinct, and instinct said let things ride. We've had you and Benson and Lee spotted for quite some time, and I knew a showdown of some sort is almost inevitable in a case of this type. Success or failure from my viewpoint was all a matter of timing. If we'd started picking you people up piecemeal, I'm afraid a lot of questions would never have been answered."

"Oh, shut up!" the girl snarled with complete feminine inconsistency.

"And now if you'll proceed, Mr. Lee."

"In plain words this unit, while basically a mind scanner, can also be used as a transposer. Of necessity, the process would be highly dangerous, even if performed by Boorman himself, who understood it thoroughly. With amateurs functioning as experts, it's a wonder no fatalities resulted."

"You don't think Boorman was involved in—"

"—in the transposition? No. He would have done a much cleaner job."

Simton Paine, his eyes on Nadine Kildane, said, "I was certain of it. I just wanted your agreement. We have almost conclusive proof this woman killed Boorman when he wouldn't go along. We know she was hand in glove with Benson, but the mechanics of what you call the transposition aren't exactly up my alley. Perhaps you could fill in."

"Whichever one of them was in contact with Benson performed the transition," Marco Lee said. "Probably the girl. In order to accomplish it, the unit and three brain structures were necessary. One of these brain structures was needed to act as a temporary receptacle for want of a better way to describe it. That role was filled by the unfortunate woman who was imprisoned in the tenement hovel owned by Benson. Her function was to serve as a temporary receiver for—"

Simton Paine was frowning. "It's getting a little thick. Maybe you're going too fast."

Marco shrugged as April's hand crawled into his own and snuggled there. "It's very simple. Benson wanted to transpose his consciousness into my brain in order to cause certain figures to be written into a book and mailed to his address. Certain figures and equations of great value to the government—and others.

"IN THE transposition, only conscious minds are transposed, the original subconscious remaining in place. But, as two complete units of consciousness cannot occupy one space, arrangements would have to be made for a place of storage, so to speak. The receptacle, or storage place, was the brain of the old woman. She was rendered unconscious, thus causing her consciousness to become a negative, non-occupying force. Then, through the high vibration control of Boorman's amazing unit, Benson's consciousness was forced into my brain; mine was forced out into the mind of the unconscious woman, where it remained and was turned negative by the drugs previously administered to her."

Simton Paine was sucking on a cold pipe. "Why was this necessary? Why couldn't your consciousness have gone back into the brain of Benson?"

"That would have defeated the whole plan. My consciousness would then have drawn upon Benson's memory, in his subconscious and I'd have probably called the police and wrecked their scheme."

"But you have no memory of having occupied the old woman's brain?"

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"None whatever. The memory quotient of a subconscious mind cannot be drawn upon when the host is not conscious."

"How do you think they got you to the Lincoln Street address in the first place, in order to accomplish the original transposition?"

"That wasn't necessary. At least, I don't think so. That's what makes this unit so dangerous when turned to these purposes. They had merely to find the wave-length of my brain and set the unit into it as a positive. Only the old woman's presence was necessary in the vicinity of the unit. That's why the transposition was made in the Lincoln Avenue pig-sty."

Marco Lee turned to the sullen Nadine Kildane. "But I don't know why the unit was left there. Was that necessary?"

"What better place to leave it?" she flared. "Nobody ever went there until you came snooping around. What put you onto it?"

Marco smiled fleetingly and directed his answer toward Simton Paine. "It was one of the repercussions of a sloppy transposition. When Benson's consciousness left my brain, there were—well, smudges of it remaining. And I went through terrific shock. That's why I wandered the town like a lost soul. In reality, that's what I was for a while. In a sense my soul had been snatched away and returned to me in a dazed condition. And there were enough smudges of Benson's consciousness still remaining to give me peculiar ideas and impulses while my own consciousness was recovering. For instance, there was enough of him still with me to tell me the woman lying in the undertaking parlor was not really dead. I knew she had to be gotten out of there."

"That was why you went to the undertaking parlor?"

"Yes, but it was Benson, or Benson's representative who stole the woman's body and brought it here."

"There must have been some other reason, so far as Benson was concerned. He didn't strike me as a man who would worry about what might happen to an old woman."

"I THINK he was afraid she'd come to and talk. He probably had violent sick spells to tell him the transposition had been a bad one, and now that I think of it, that's probably why Norshi was trying to kill me—on Benson's orders after he realized he hadn't gotten completely back and I'd eventually remember what had happened."

Nadine Kildane sprang up from the lounge. "Are we going to hang around here yammering all night? What is this—a lecture series? If I'm under arrest, take me in! That goddam pipe makes me sick!"

Simton Paine put the pipe into his pocket. "I guess we *can* adjourn for the time being," he said. "I'll call an ambulance for the woman and—"

"Put down that phone, my friend." The voice was guttural. "And don't move! Anyone! Raise hands—all!"

Every hand in the room went up except the one Marco Lee was using to hold the Boorman control unit. They turned as one to behold a florid-faced Greshman in a doorway. He was smiling. "I appear to hold the winning ace, gentlemen. This is it in my hand." He gestured toward Marco. "Set that box down, my friend."

Marco Lee didn't move. Paine said, "You'll never get away with it."

"Won't I?" Grinning, Greshman turned his tiny black eyes on Nadine Kildane. "You and I, baby. Pull down the drape cords. Rip the sheets. You've got some tying up to do. All we'll need is an hour or two. You and

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I and this box. I know some people who want to buy it."

Flashing a triumphant look at Simton Paine, Nadine Kildane took three steps and swung an open palm against his jaw. The palm connected with a report that sounded like a pistol shot. Paine did a remarkable job of appearing unmoved.

"Cut it out!" Greshman snapped. "We got no time for petty beefs. Get going on the drape cords."

MARCO LEE saw her first because the bedroom door was in line with his vision. April would have seen her too, but April had eyes only for Marco. Marco saw the old woman and the sight made him a little sick.

She stood in the bedroom doorway with a gun in her hand, and even then the thought was in Marco's mind: *I'll bet no one ever finds out where she got that little automatic.*

But that didn't matter, really. She had it—this pitiful bag of bones—this degraded, starved body they'd hauled to the undertaking parlor for dead—she had a gun and was standing in the bedroom doorway holding the gun and staring into the room with flat, empty eyes.

The eyes seemed centered upon Nadine Kildane, but Marco knew they took in everything. When she spoke it sent shivers up Marco Lee's spine and brought everyone in the room around to stare.

The woman said, "You rotten—bitch. I'm going to kill you. You—evil woman. You soul snatcher. You're going to die."

She didn't have the strength to speak above a low monotone. No inflection, not even any anger in the voice. And that made it sound all the more like the voice of doom.

Nadine Kildane didn't seem particularly frightened. She frowned at the sad bag of bones and said, "Oh—Maggie. You've come around. I—" Then she stopped talking, as though a little of the horror the woman radiated had finally soaked in.

Greshman didn't know quite what to do. He was in the line of fire. The woman had only to move the gun a scant half-inch to have him in its sights. Bringing his own gun around would have taken quite a while in relation.

"Who's she?" he grunted, and began backing out of range.

"Stay where you are," the old woman croaked. Greshman stopped still in his tracks. No one moved.

Nadine Kildane said, "Maggie—for Heaven's sake."

The old woman went on droning: "Just because I was poor and didn't have no money. Just because I didn't have no friends and had to live in Benson's rat hole."

"Maggie!"

"Come here—bitch."

Nadine turned full-front to the old woman and took a step forward. She was obviously a little scared now. She took another step. Then the gun in the old woman's hand barked and the bullets began slapping into Nadine Kildane's smooth midriff.

They slapped in one after another, tearing nasty little holes in her dress and then her skin and then what was under the skin. They doubled her up. She opened her mouth and some blood came out of it as she tipped over and went to the floor.

Simton Paine dived for Greshman even before the old woman had emptied the gun into what was left of Nadine Kildane's life. Now Nadine wasn't beautiful any more and her life was gone and Simton Paine had knocked Greshman down and had kicked him once in the face and once

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in the temple. Simton Paine wasn't concerned with sportsmanship.

Greshman hadn't let go of his gun yet. But his eyes were closed and when he fired it he fired blind. Anybody could have been killed. Marco Lee came the closest. He'd picked the aluminum box off the table instinctively, without thinking, because to Marco Lee the box was important, of the greatest importance next to April, and he'd pushed her to the floor.

Greshman's bullets went through the circle of Marco's arm around the box—through the box—in to the front and out the back. Three shots, knocking the box from Marco's grip before another kick in the temple put Greshman out for what could have been a long time.

Simton's eyes were on the box too. He watched as Marco picked it up. "Can it be fixed?" Simton asked.

"I don't know," Marco said. "I don't know whether I want to even if I can. I don't think I want to."

There was the sound of someone falling and the old woman was stretched on the floor across the body of Nadine Kildane. Simton Paine went over and knelt down. Pretty soon he said, "I think she's really dead now—for the last time."

April was on her feet, hanging to Marco's arm. "I—I want to get out of here," she whispered. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Marco put his arm around her and said to Simton Paine, "Can we go now? We can talk later and tie up all the ends then."

Paine was staring down at the old woman. Without looking up he said, "Yeah—you can go. We can talk later."

Marco said, "Thank you." He and April went immediately out into the hall and down into the street. And home.

THE END

RADIATION *Burns Me Up!*

By Salem Lane

BECAUSE we live with the atomic bomb, and because radiation is with us, deadly, insidious killer that it is, scientists have devoted a great deal of time and energy to studying precisely how radiations from radioactive substances kill or injure living tissues. Several interesting facts have been observed. First, radiation kills by destroying—somehow—the white blood cells and the blood-cell-producing equipment of the human body, the lymph glands, the tonsils, etc. Cells which do not reproduce rapidly are relatively unaffected by ordinarily lethal radiations.

Since the human body is composed of over seventy percent water in one form or another, it is wise to look to this substance so far as the death of cells is concerned. Apparently the water molecules of the cells, when struck indiscriminately by radioactive particles, are broken down and ionized in oxygen and hydrogen ions. While acidic sources are not particularly dangerous, the oxygen ions are another matter. These ions literally oxidize, or burn, the delicate, complicated molecules which do the cell-reproducing.

In a phrase, radiation "burns you up"!

Further evidence of this indirect operation of the killing effects of radiation is found in the fact that rats and insects whose oxygen supply has been artificially reduced are less susceptible to radiation than they normally would be.

To counteract radiation, injections of blood and blood plasma are helpful, along with solutions of iron, vitamins, amino acids, certain organic dyes, and several hemorrhage-stopping chemicals. At first scientists thought there was nothing to be done to offset the effects of radiation. But now it is being learned that a definite pharmaceutical program can be set up and the victim of radiation exposure is not helpless. Of course that hope might not be too comforting to the victim of an atomic bombing!

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STRICTLY FORMAL

By Gerald Vance

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It's frustrating. After working all day to fix up the peony bed, this meteor tears right into it. A strange kind of meteor too—with a message in it!

THE EXPLOSION came at night; nothing terrific, and no great concussion. Just a quick bright flash outside the Evans bedroom window.

Sam and Marie Evans were asleep when the object—whatever it was—struck the earth. The flash brightened the window and the house shook a trifle. But it was over so quickly, they couldn't be sure. Sam awoke with a white cloud in front of his eyes.

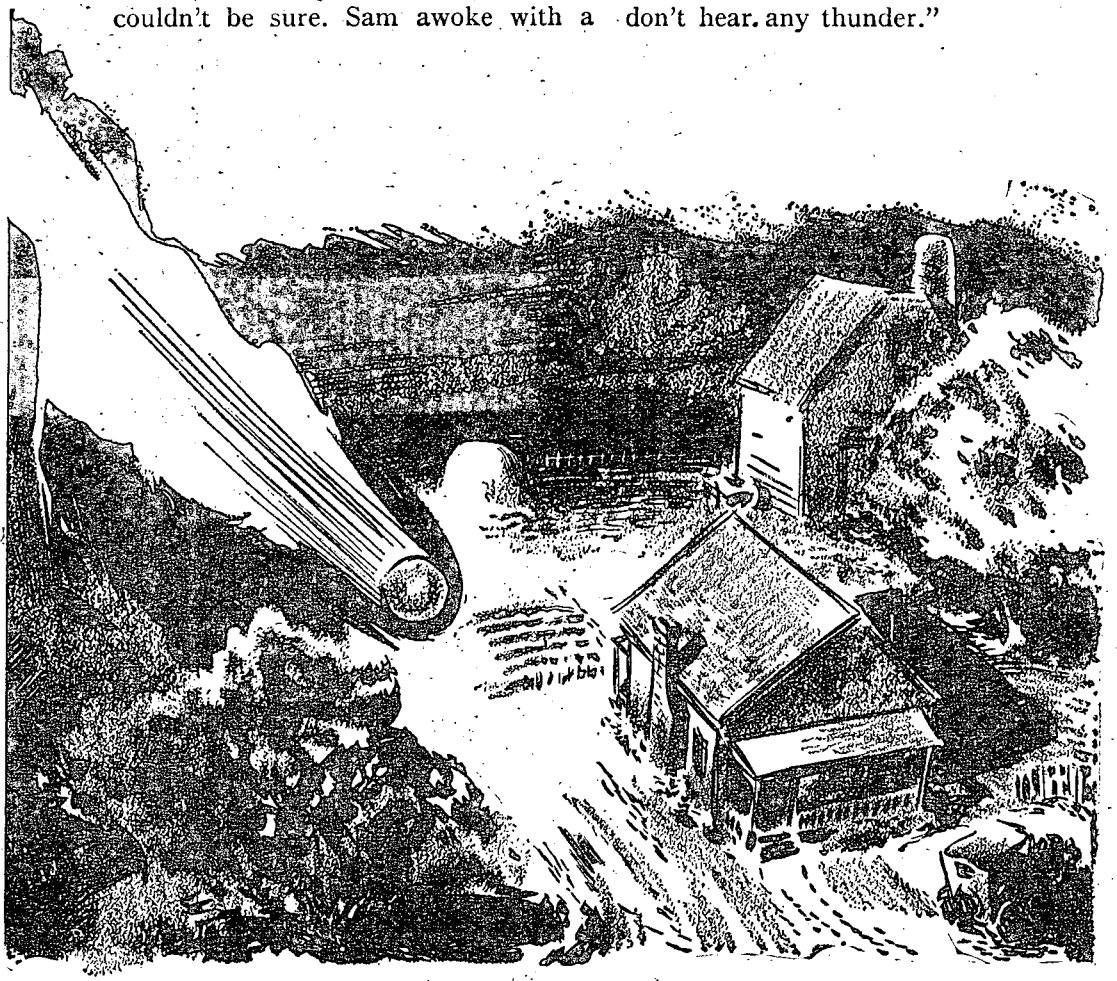
"Marie—Marie. Did you feel—see that?"

"What, Sam?"

"I don't know. Maybe a storm's coming up."

"The sky was clear when we went to bed. Get up and shut the window, will you, darling?"

"It's hot. Maybe I was mistaken. I don't hear any thunder."



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"Then go back to sleep. I want you to weed the garden in the morning."

"I was going fishing."

"Yes dear. That's right. Weed the garden."

The next morning nothing was said about the midnight awakening. There was no need for comment as the storm had not broken and the day was bright and sunny.

But around ten o'clock, Sam found a four-foot indentation in the peony bed while he was walking toward the garden. He called his wife. She came to stare in horror.

"Sam! What on earth have you done?"

"Me? I didn't do it."

"Then what—how? Oh, my beautiful flowers—ruined! It's those dogs again."

Sam scratched his head. "I don't think so, Marie. Dogs aren't so neat and tidy. They don't dig a cone-shaped hole four feet in diameter. Besides, there aren't any tracks."

Marie grasped his arm. She was uneasy—almost frightened. "Then what could it have been, Sam? What sort of an animal did it?"

"I don't think it was an animal. Remember that flash I saw last night?"

"A bolt of lightning did—this? I never heard of lightning knocking a hole in the bare ground."

"Neither did I. You know Marie—I wonder. I just wonder. Do you think something could have fallen from somewhere?" He brightened with excitement. "Maybe a meteor, Marie. The things that fall out of the sky."

His wife was doubtful. "I've heard they're great big things. They tear a hole miles wide. I read about one once in the wilds of northern Russia. . . ."

POSSIBLY SAM was sincere, or perhaps he struck on the idea to get out of the weeding job. Anyhow, he waxed enthusiastic. "Tell you who'd be interested in this, Marie. That astronomy professor—that Mr. Fuzzy or Fazzy or something. He's got a cottage on Ben's place across the lake. Now, I'll just row over and get him—"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Sam Evans."

"Why not, honey? After all—"

"Who's land is this, anyhow?"

"Why ours, of course—except for the mortgage."

"Then if that's a meteor, who does it belong to?"

"Us, I guess."

"Then why are you talking about calling somebody else in? It was the same way when that pretty collie dog came to stay with us. You had to traipse off and keep hunting until you found somebody that knew somebody who lost—"

"Okay, honey. Okay. But what are we going to do? Just stand here and look at the hole?"

"Of course not, stupid. You're going to get a shovel and see what you can find."

It was better than weeding the garden because there was a certain air of novelty to it—a definite sense of the mysterious. Sam got a shovel and started to dig.

He uncovered nothing. Nothing but the rich, dark earth that makes peas as big as marbles and corn on foot-long ears. Sam went down two feet and began to tire. He rested while Marie brought him a glass of water. He started anew and went down another two feet. He stopped and mopped his brow.

"Guess it's a wild-goose chase, honey. There's nothing here nohow. Maybe a dog did make this hole."

"Now, don't be lazy, Sam. You go ahead and dig."

"Well—another foot maybe."

Another foot uncovered nothing.

"One more spadeful, Sam, before

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you quit. They say it happens that way sometimes on treasure hunts. I read it in Tom Sawyer, how once—"

Marie stopped talking. Sam had turned another shovelful and another. The second time he brought up a small round object that rolled off his shovel and half buried itself in the soft soil.

"What's that, Sam? What's that?"

"Looks like a rock. Gimme time to pick it up."

"It's too smooth and round for a rock, Sam."

HE HAD picked it up and cleaned it off. "Hmmm. The thing's warm. He held the sphere forth in his hand, squinting at it with calculation. It's metal of some sort—and kind of warm. Looks for all the world like a lump of grapeshot. You suppose some joker fired an old cannon at us last night?"

"Sam, you're daffy. Who ever saw a perfectly round chunk of grapeshot the size of a cantaloupe? Give it to me."

Sam handed the object to his wife who promptly dropped it on his foot. He danced around on the other foot while she picked it up again.

"Why didn't you tell me it was heavy?"

"You didn't give me a chance. Why can't you be more careful?"

"You'll live, Sam Evans." Marie carried the ball to the house and laid it on the stone walk.

Sam hobbled after her and watched as she cleaned it with her apron until it gave off a dull luster. "Looks like it was made from an old aluminum pot," Sam said. "Hadn't I better go get that astronomer fellow now? He'll know more about it than we do."

"Sam Evans! Stop being such a fool! It's our meteor. Why should we call some college man in who might figure a way to cheat us out of it? Besides, this don't look like any meteor to me. I do believe it comes apart some way. Get a screw driver and a hammer and the axe, Sam. Guess we got enough sense to open our own property."

"Maybe we have at that, honey."

Sam went to the tool shed and got the equipment and came back and went to work. He began by tapping it lightly with a hammer.

He finished, half an hour later, by slugging it whole-heartedly with the axe. The material of the ball was surprisingly tough. It took the axe blows with scarcely a nick and refused to open. Sam wiped his brow. "We could try roasting it open on a fire."

"You think of the silliest things."

"Why silly? Nuts pop open on a hot fire. Maybe this is some kind of a nut."

"If it came through space, it got red hot from the atmosphere. I read that in a book about meteors."

Sam looked up at the bright sky. "I've heard tell it's pretty cold up there. Not hot at all."

"That's got nothing to do with it. Nothing at—Sam! Look!"

MARIE HAD picked up the ball and had given it an energetic twist. It came apart in her hands.

"The pounding must have loosened it. Let me see. What's inside?"

Disappointment was mirrored in Marie's face. "Not a thing. Not a single, solitary thing except a piece of paper."

"Well, a piece of paper's something. Let me see."

The paper was folded twice. Opened, it was revealed to be about five inches square and was of very heavy, almost metallic paper. It was covered with spidery markings in black ink.

Marie held the paper forth, and together they studied the markings.

"Don't make no sense to me," Sam said. "Looks like some youngster was marking with a little paint brush."

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Marie sighed. "All that work for nothing."

Sam was slightly ruffled. "Well, I didn't see you doing none of it."

"All wasted," Marie went on as though he hadn't spoken. "Seems like we never have no luck, Sam."

He softened and put an arm about her shoulders. "Don't you fret none, honey. We've got our home and it's almost paid for. We've got each other."

"And our garden."

Sam took his arm away. "Oh, sure. The garden. Honey, why don't I take this thing over to that Mr. Fuzzy? He might be interested even though it's just a paper."

"His name is Fusari. But remember—you aren't getting out of anything. You'll weed the garden tomorrow."

"Of course, honey. I'd do it today, but this is pretty important."

PROFESSOR JOHN FUSARI listened to Sam's story, first with polite interest and then with interest that was far more than polite. He studied the two halves of the hollow ball, examined the paper, peered at the writing.

"Mr. Evans," he said finally, "I wonder if you'd let me take these down to the city with me tomorrow. I'm not qualified to pass an opinion as to whether they came from outer space or not. But I know a man—a friend of mine—Professor Holman at the university, who is an expert on languages. If this is writing, he will know it. If any man on earth can translate it, Holman can. He's been doing a lot of work recently on Egyptian and *Sanskrit*."

"Is that so?" Sam said. "Well, now, I don't see any reason why you shouldn't take these trinkets with you. They sure aren't any good to me."

"Thank you. Thank you very much."

Sam went home wondering what *Sanskrit* was.

Marie saw to it that he got at the weeds the following day. That gave him an excuse to go fishing on Wednesday. Thursday it rained, and on Friday Marie asked, "Sam, whatever happened to our meteor? Didn't that professor person say he'd call you up if he heard anything?"

"Guess he must not have heard anything," Sam said mildly.

As if by prearrangement, the phone rang at that precise moment. Sam answered. He listened a while and then hung up. "Got to bustle over to the professor's," he said importantly. "That other professor's coming up to the country to see this professor of ours, and our professor says for me to come over."

"Sam—how many professors are mixed up in this thing? I thought you said—"

"Never mind. I'll probably have a lot more to say when I get back." He went down and got into the boat and rowed across to Professor Fusari's place.

PROFESSOR HOLMAN arrived a little later. He was a benign-looking man with a halo of white hair around the rim of an otherwise bald head. He had Sam's mysterious piece of letter paper with him.

They sat on the porch and drank beer out of the cans and Holman answered Fusari's first question by saying, "Yes, I managed it. That is, basically. In some ways the language was most difficult—in others, very easy. I got the gist of it without any trouble."

"Do you think the document came from outer space?"

"Oh—I'm sure of it. Of course, others will have to come to prove me right, but I'm sure it came from space."

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"From Mars?"

"Probably."

"Then you learned something of the Martians?"

"Well—no."

"Too bad."

"Not directly, that is. Indirectly, I think I learned a great deal."

"Tell us."

"I discovered beyond doubt what the document was, and from that I could deduce a picture. Scientifically, of course, they are ahead of us. Politically, they are backward. The note was obviously from a powerful man—a king or an emperor—who has all science at his command."

"Interesting," Fusari said.

Sam said nothing. He drank his beer and listened.

"Yet, this emperor," Holman went went on, "is a man pretty much like ourselves. He has the same emotions—the same personal pride. This is how the picture is in my mind: a great monarch on Mars, extremely happy over an event of great importance to himself and possibly to all Mars. In at least one way, a most arrogant monarch, because he wanted the whole universe to know of this event, and used Martian science to acquaint them with it. He probably fired a great many of those balls into space."

Sam was getting bored, but he was too polite to get up and walk away. So he sat and listened until Professor Holman finished. Finally he rowed the boat back across the lake.

"What did you find out, Sam?" Marie asked.

Sam was in a low mood. Possibly because the meteor thing hadn't panned out so well. He sighed. "You know, Marie, you're right. We don't have much luck at all somehow. We never get out much. Nobody ever invites us nowhere."

"What's that got to do with the meteor?"

"Like I was saying. Just our luck. We finally get invited to a big affair—a nice shindig—and it's being held on some other planet we can't get to."

"Sam Evans! What are you talking about?"

"I'm telling you! That's what the meteor was. Some Martian king invited us to his daughter's wedding."

THE END

CLOTHES SAVE THE MAN

By Frederic Booth

IN THE OLDEN DAYS, when a warrior wanted to safeguard his life in battle, he was forced to wear an extremely heavy armor made of steel which so encumbered his movement that its advantages were doubtful.

Now the Army has reported the development of a new plastic armor which is said to be capable of stopping a .45 bullet at pointblank range. These lightweight protective helmets and jackets are going to be given tests under battle conditions in Korea. They are to be tried out by litter bearers who now work without any kind of protection.

Field tests will be conducted later for armoured seats to be used in liaison airplanes and for eye armor to be used by men clearing mines.

It is hoped that shell fragments, as well as small-arms fire which is almost spent, will bounce off the new armor. Little protection is expected against such types of high-velocity missiles as rifle or machine-gun fire.

One of the jacket models is made of cotton fitted with stiff panels of glass fiber and plastic about an eighth of an inch thick. Several layers of nylon pressed together make up another type of jacket.

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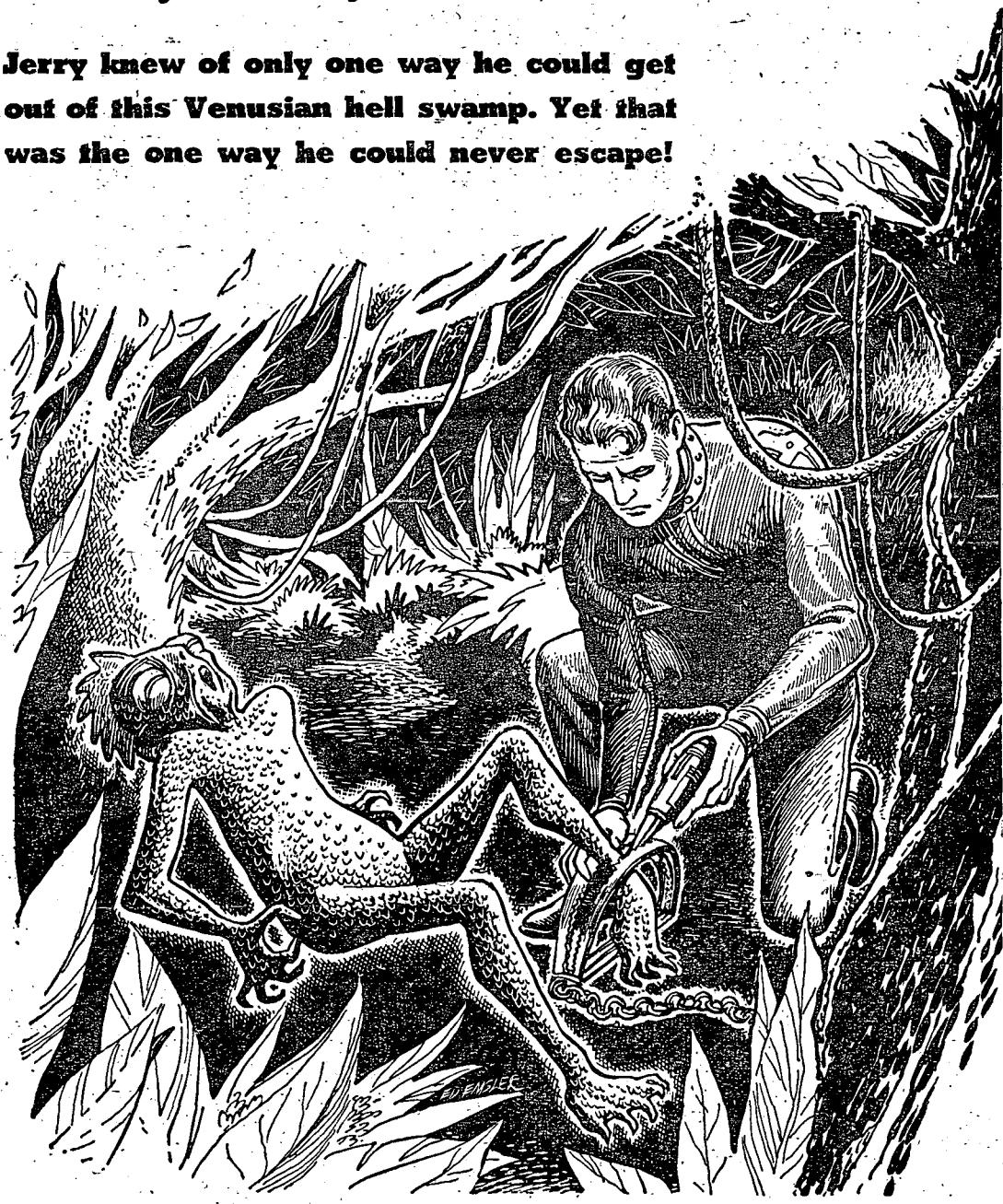
WHO FLEE THEIR CHAINS

By Guy Archette

Jerry knew of only one way he could get out of this Venusian hell swamp. Yet that was the one way he could never escape!



The Scalie screamed in agony as Jerry began to remove the trap from its foot

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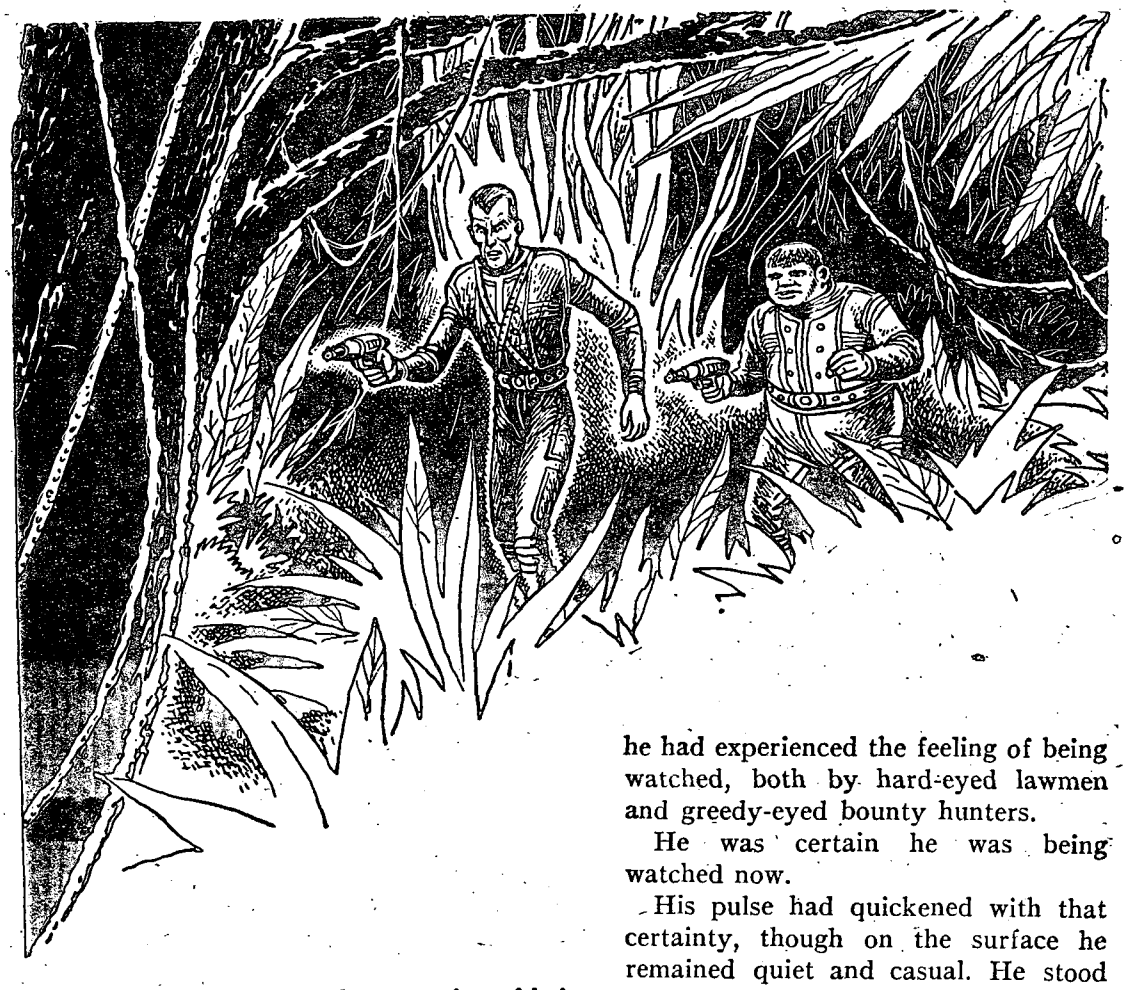

HE HAD the sensation of being watched.

It was a sensation known to men in lonely places; and this sparsely settled plateau country in North Gondwanaland, on Venus, was lonelier than most. The very loneliness of their surroundings gives these men a heightened sensitivity to the presence of others, human or animal.

Jerry Gill's sensitivity was especially heightened. As a contract laborer on a huge, corporation-owned *kwaali* plantation, he had learned what it was like to be watched—watched constantly, by sharp-eyed overseers, with their ever-present, ever-ready shock-sticks. And as a contract-buster—a fugitive—he had experienced the feeling of being watched, both by hard-eyed lawmen and greedy-eyed bounty hunters.

He was certain he was being watched now.

His pulse had quickened with that certainty, though on the surface he remained quiet and casual. He stood peering through the fine rain that fell almost continuously in this part of Venus, a slim, sandy-haired figure in a glistening, transparent drizzle-suit. His face, beneath the suit's hood, was the face of a boy who had become a man too soon, its frankness and humor overlaid with the marks of toil and care. One hand, inserted through a slit in the suit, rested on the butt of the mach-pistol holstered at his side.

He ran his eyes over the dense forest wall that towered abruptly beyond the poison trench at the edge of his *kwaali* field. He could see nothing amid the maze of huge greenish-gray leaves and tree trunks, but he knew anything might be concealed there.

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Anything from a tiger-lizard to a Scalie, one of the race of Venusian natives inhabiting this region.

He thought suddenly of Hazel, alone at the cabin, and he turned with an inner lurch of anxiety to peer toward the farm building up the slope behind him. The cabin stood on concrete supports, well above the muddy ground, and he could see the outline of those of its windows that faced toward him.

Perhaps it was only Hazel watching; but he dismissed the thought as quickly as it came. There was a gentleness and trust in Hazel's gaze that he did not feel now. What he sensed held a different quality: slyness, threat.

He turned for a last wary glance at the forest. And stiffened in startled surprise.

TWO FIGURES in drizzle-suits were leaping the poison trench, hurrying toward him through the *kwaali* plants.

Through the gray curtain of rain, Gill saw they were white men, armed with rifles and carrying light packs. Evidently aware they had been seen, the men lifted their hands, palms outward, and called out the universal greeting of Venus: *"Kaa-hai!"*

Gill loosened his mach-pistol in its holster before he lifted his own hand. If these men were dangerous, at least they seemed to intend no immediate harm. A show of friendliness would help to establish peaceful relations.

Yet he remained uneasy. A contract-buster was always uneasy. Discovery and capture meant being sentenced to a convict labor gang for a term of five years—in addition to the years remaining unserved under the broken contract. In Gill's case this amounted to a total of somewhat more than eight years.

Eight years of virtual slavery. Eight years of being watched and driven, of being underfed and overworked.

Few lived through even five such years, what with the ravages of the Venusian climate and Venusian diseases.

There was an out. Freedom could be purchased. But the price was most often beyond the reach of persons like small-scale *kwaali* farmers.

It was a simple economic fact that Gill knew only too well. He had spent countless sleepless hours figuring what it would cost to buy his freedom and pay his and Hazel's passage to Earth. And lately his figuring had been done with increasing desperation. Only last week the doctor from the settlement had warned him that Hazel's life depended on her leaving Venus as soon as possible. Her attacks of blue fever were becoming too frequent and too severe. He could have managed to send her alone, but she wouldn't go without him.

These thoughts flashed through his mind as the two men approached. They were an ill-matched pair, rough and slovenly in appearance. One was lean and wolfish in build, the other heavy and squat. Studying them as they came nearer, Gill was suddenly struck by an impression of familiarity.

All at once he had a cold, sick feeling.

The two men had recognized him also. He heard their surprised exclamations.

"Howling hell, Sam, just look who we've run into!" the wolfish-one said.

"It's Gill! Old Jerry Gill himself, alive and kicking! Well, cut my blast, Duff!" This from the squat one.

"Kaa-hai!" Gill retorted with pretended affability. "What are you two doing in this neck of the woods?"

THE LAST time he had seen Duff Malloy and Sam Harper, they had been contract laborers in his platoon.

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Since their contracts had still a few years to run, it was evident that they had skipped out, become outlaws as he himself had done.

Gill knew Sam Harper would give him no reason for worry. The squat man had little intelligence and even less courage. He was the type that enjoyed taking orders, since that solved the problem of existence in a complex world.

Duff Malloy, however, was a different proposition. His nature was as wolfish as his appearance, combining a quick, crafty mind with a complete lack of honor or scruple. He never overlooked an opportunity for personal gain. As a contract laborer, he had organized half a dozen lucrative rackets, including a traffic in forbidden Venusian narcotics. And he had been suspected of at least one killing at the plantation, though his guilt had never been proved.

Malloy was the last person in the world Gill would have wanted to know of his background and whereabouts. With his ruthless instincts, the man would not hesitate to use the knowledge as a weapon.

"Our flitter ran out of fuel back there," Malloy said, gesturing toward the forest. "Me and Sam saw your place as we passed over, and so we hiked back. Never thought we'd run into you here, Gill."

"I'm surprised you boys are jetting around loose," Gill said. "You must have jumped your contracts."

Harper said, "We got fed up with the way that *kwaali* outfit was treating us, and we—"

"Shut up, Sam!" Malloy said sharply.

The squat man looked resentful, but shrugged carelessly. Fear moved like a shadow over his heavy face under the fierce impact of Malloy's pale eyes.

To Gill, Malloy said, "Me and Sam are free as the wind. We bought up our contracts."

Gill's smile was twisted. "I know better than that. If you had bought up your contracts, you wouldn't have bothered to watch me from the forest the way you did. Only a couple of contract-busters would want to make sure I wasn't the law, or that there wasn't any law around. Besides, Sam let the cat out of the bag."

MALLOY SCOWLED. "Well, I guess you ought to know, Gill. You ain't going to tell me you bought up your contract."

"Maybe I did."

"The hell you did. Where'd you dig up that kind of fancy money?" Malloy's narrow face wrinkled in a sudden, conspiratorial grin. "Let's stop trying to fool each other, Gill. We know where we stand." He gestured toward the *kwaali* field. "How you making out?"

"How does any small *kwaali* farmer make out against the big corporation plantations?" Gill demanded bitterly.

"Well, me and Sam ain't been doing so bad," Malloy said. "We managed to pick up a nice piece of change here and there. Odd jobs, sort of. Right now we're working on something that's going to put a big hunk of cash in our pockets. Ever hear of bio-pearls, Gill?"

"I've heard of them. They're supposed to be very rare, worth a lot of money."

"I'll say they're worth a lot of money!" Malloy's pale eyes glittered with avarice. "That's because only about a dozen have ever been found. The last one brought in sold for—how much do you think it sold for, Gill? How much do you think?"

"Ten thousand?" Gill hazarded. "Twenty thousand?"

"Thirty-five thousand!" Malloy said. "And it wasn't such a good one,

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either. Think how much a good one would sell for. Think how much a handful would sell for!"

Gill shrugged. "The things are too rare. Where would anybody find a handful?"

Malloy smiled thinly. "I got an idea about that. Nothing I'm going to give away for free, understand. But here's something to chew on. Bio-pearls grow, see? That's why they're called bio-pearls. And they grow only in a few places. Something special in the soil, I guess. Nobody knows where to find those places. But I do."

Excitement kindled in Gill. "You mean you know what kind of soil to look for?"

MALLOY'S expression became mocking. "That would be telling. And I ain't telling." He peered through the fine rain at the farm buildings up the slope. "Nice little place you got here, Gill. Me and Sam are in luck, all right."

"Yeah," Harper put in. He shuddered slightly and gestured toward the forest. "We thought we'd have to camp out there, and me, I wasn't too keen about the idea."

Gill said slowly, "What was it you came here for, Malloy? You said your flitter ran out of fuel. I can let you have some."

Malloy waved a hand. "No hurry about that, Gill. No hurry at all. Let's go up to the house and get inside where it's dry."

Gill remained motionless. "We'd better understand each other, Malloy. I can let you have some fuel and just about anything else you might need. But I stop there."

The other's pale eyes narrowed. "What the hell, Gill, you ain't cold-shouldering me and Sam, are you?"

"You can put it that way if you want to," Gill returned. "I've got a sick wife in the cabin. She has blue fever, and she has to have it quiet. You know what blue fever cases are like."

"A wife, eh?" Malloy glanced shyly at Harper. "Well, ain't that cozy! All right, Gill, you want us to be quiet, we'll be quiet."

"Not once you two start hitting the bottle. I know your habits." Gill shook his head doggedly. His breathing had quickened. "I'll give you the fuel, Malloy. Anything else. But that's as far as I go."

The wolfish man's face became ugly with anger. "Figure your wife's too good for us, eh?"

"Not too good. Too sick."

"Maybe she doesn't know you're nothing but a contract-buster. Maybe you don't want her to find out."

"She knows."

"Then maybe you figure you're too good to associate with us any more," Malloy said furiously. "Well, if that ain't the limit! I never thought I'd live to see the day when one contract man would cold-shoulder another. Hell, Gill, we were in the same platoon together. We slept in the same bunkhouse, ate at the same mess table."

"So did a lot of other men," Gill said. "That doesn't put either of us under any obligation to the other. You never did any favors for me, Malloy. In fact, you weren't even friendly toward me."

"I could do you a favor now—by not telling some lawman where to find you. Think about that, Gill. You wouldn't like to be sentenced to a convict labor gang, would you?"

GILL SHRUGGED leadenly. "If I have to choose between a labor gang and my wife dying, I'll take the labor gang."

Malloy's mouth curled and he made a sudden movement to shift the position of his rifle. "Well, by God, if I have to—"

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"Hold it, Malloy!" Gill's hand had remained close to the mach-pistol at his side. Now he drew it in a flash of motion. "I was hoping I wouldn't have any trouble with you two, but if trouble is what you want, I'll see that you get it. I could kill you both and bury you out in the forest. Nobody would ever find you."

"Wait a minute, Gill!" Malloy said anxiously. "Now, don't start blasting your jets. I was only kidding."

"Sure, Jerry," Harper put in, fright shining in his small eyes. "You know we wouldn't do anything mean."

"I'm going to make certain of that," Gill said. "Put the rifle down, Malloy. You too, Harper. Then get your hands up, both of you, and step back."

The two men thrust their rifles into the mud and moved away from them. Circling carefully behind the pair, Gill took the weapons remaining in their holsters. He removed the shell clips from the collection and with these strode a short distance up the slope.

"All right, there are your guns. Take them and clear out."

"But what about the fuel, Gill?" Malloy asked quickly.

"You had your chance at it—until you talked about tipping off the law. I'd be a fool to put you in a position to use your flitter and do just that."

Malloy said desperately, "I was just kidding, Gill. You know I wouldn't turn you in. If you'll let me have the fuel, I promise—"

"No fuel. And don't try getting it at the settlement, either. I'm going to see that the right people are warned to watch for a couple of contract-busters."

"Hell, Gill, you're making it tough for us," Malloy protested.

"No tougher than you'd have made it for me, if you'd got the chance. All I want is to keep you two out of mischief for a while. Now, take your guns and clear out."

Malloy's narrow face knotted with abrupt fury. "I'm going to remember this, Gill." He jerked his head at Harper. The two retrieved their weapons, and then, with a last baleful glance at Gill, Malloy led the way back across the *kwaali* field.

GILL TURNED and strode through the rain and the clinging mud underfoot, to the cabin. He knew he'd be in danger once Malloy and Harper gained the shelter of the forest and reloaded their weapons. Luckily, the cabin walls were strong enough to withstand a spraying.

Before rounding an angle of the cabin, he peered back toward the forest. He saw the small, rain-blurred shapes of Malloy and Harper as they entered the tangle of gray-green foliage and became lost to view. He waited for long minutes, his muscles bunched with tension, but no bursts of firing came from the spot where the pair had vanished.

Malloy evidently had some more subtle means of revenge in mind.

Gill strode up the cabin steps and entered the sani-spray stall. He waited while the disinfectant shower washed the mud from his boots, together with the bacteria, spores and other tiny but voracious and prolific Venusian life that had collected on them, and in the folds of his drizzle-suit. Finally, turning off the spray, he removed his outer garments and entered the cabin.

He found Hazel seated on the edge of her bed, her small, pale face drawn with anxiety.

"Jerry!" she said. "Those men—I saw what happened. Who were they? What was the matter?"

"You're supposed to stay in bed," he said accusingly.

"I'm tired of staying in bed, Jerry—tired of being so helpless, such a

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burden. I wondered what you were doing, and when I looked out of the window I saw the men you were talking to. It looked like they were up to trouble of some sort."

"Nothing serious," he lied. "Just a couple of tramps. They had an idea of making themselves at home here, but they weren't the kind of men I'd trust under the same roof with me. I ran them off."

HE KNEW the explanation sounded too pat, and he looked away from the doubt in Hazel's dark eyes. She knew about his past—he wouldn't have had it otherwise—but he didn't want her to know that a very real and active threat had risen from it. Her health depended on quiet, and complete freedom from worry and fear.

She said slowly, "Are you sure there wasn't more to it, Jerry? I keep thinking that sometime someone's going to recognize you, someone who knows what you once were."

He shrugged casually as he busied himself before the stove. "Not very likely out here."

"It could happen anywhere, Jerry. I couldn't stand having you dragged away to the kind of slavery they allow on Venus. It's a rotten system."

"But a necessary one," he said. "It was the only thing that would meet conditions here. Men are needed to work and develop the planet, a lot of men. And the only way to get them to Venus is to sign them up as labor recruits. Most of them don't have the kind of money it takes to pay their passage. The big corporations do, but before they spend it they've got to be sure they'll get full value in return. They can't have men slip through their fingers to take easier jobs or better-paying jobs with rival corporations. That means contracts and laws against breaking them.

"It isn't a bad system. After the usual five years of service, a man has his freedom and money paid for good behavior and work done above quotas. He has practically the whole planet to pick from. The opportunities for getting rich are almost endless."

"Except for contract-busters." Hazel shook her dark head, her expression wistful. "If it's such a good system, Jerry, what about those awful scars on your back?"

He shrugged. "It's a good system—for the most part. Any system has a few of the wrong kind of men in it, and I happened to be unlucky enough to draw them. Men who take advantage of things to make a bigger profit than they otherwise could. In my case, everyone from the big brass down to the overseers seemed to have the idea they were running a slave labor camp—instead of a business."

THE GIRL was silent a moment, staring down at her clasped hands. She said abruptly, "Isn't there any hope for you, Jerry? Any hope that you won't have to hide any more—that you can go wherever you please, without being afraid that someone—?"

"Maybe there is," he said suddenly, his tone musing. He sat down on the bed beside her, his hands on her shoulders. "Maybe there is," he said again. "And if there is, honey, would you help me?"

"Of course," she said at once. "But what could I do?"

"I want you to stay at the settlement, where I know you'll be in good hands. That will give me the chance to make a little trip and sort of work on an idea I have."

She studied him anxiously. "Jerry, this trip—does it have anything to do with the men who were here?"

"In a way, yes. You see, honey, those men had the idea they could find bio-pearls around here somewhere."

"Bio-pearls! But, Jerry, why here?"

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"I don't know exactly. They weren't giving away that information. But I think I have it figured out. Some of the bio-pearls brought in were obtained by trading with the Scalies. I think all the bio-pearls were found that way, but most men didn't want to admit it, maybe to keep away competition. And there's a Scalie village in the forest, not very far from here. I'll bet almost anything that's where those two tramps are headed."

Gill's eyes gleamed. "They said something about bio-pearls growing only in a special kind of soil. I figure they expect to find that kind of soil somewhere in this region, through the Scalies. The Scalies would know, because bio-pearls have been obtained through them. And if I could trade for one, beat the other two men to it—"

She clutched at him. "It would mean freedom for you, Jerry! Freedom!"

"And Earth for you," he said. "Will you do it—stay at the settlement for a while?"

"Yes, Jerry. But you'll be careful, won't you? For some reason, those two men worry me."

"I'll be careful all right, don't worry about that. We'll leave here as soon as we can get you ready."

He felt a deep relief. His plan had accomplished its first and most important objective, which was to get Hazel away from the cabin and out of danger.

THE FOREST was dank and gloomy, a bizarrely patterned labyrinth that led on and on through depth after riotously luxuriant depth. Gill moved slowly through the choked, narrow lanes among the vegetation, swinging his machete at the vines and branches that blocked his path. With the mach-pistol gripped in his other hand, he probed warily at the thick shadows that lay everywhere among the huge dripping leaves, his ears alert for any change in the heavy, alien silence that lay around him.

Three days, Earth-time, had passed since he had flown Hazel to the settlement. Returning to the farm, he had taken the precaution of leaving his flitter in a spot where it was not likely to be discovered by anyone else. His entire supply of fuel had been put aboard the craft and left there for safekeeping. This stratagem, he hoped, would keep Malloy and Harper localized until he had time to carry out his plans.

He knew nothing of the whereabouts of the two, though on his first day in the forest he had run across a spot where they had made camp. He had followed their trail for a while, then had lost them. But he felt he had an advantage over Malloy and Harper; he was familiar with this region, having flown over it numerous times in his flitter. He knew both the exact location of the Scalie village and the quickest route for reaching it.

The Scalie tribe here, however, was pretty much an unknown quantity. The natives kept to themselves and seemed to ignore attempts at friendship. Those few he saw near the farm occasionally always faded back into the forest at his approach. The Scalies were not dangerous as a rule, but there were instances of attacks on Earthmen by the more primitive types. Gill had only a vague idea about how he was going to deal with those he intended to visit—he didn't know at all what Malloy and Harper intended to do.

CHOPPING his way through a dense tangle of undergrowth, Gill suddenly found himself on the bank of a broad, swift-flowing stream. This, he knew, had its source in the mountains; and from here it continued for some dozen miles more before descending, in a series of waterfalls, to the night-marish jungle-choked lowland valleys.

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The lowlands, ventured into by only a few intrepid explorers, were uninhabitable by Earthmen and, to a large extent, even by Venusians.

The Scalie village was now a mile or two downstream; and after resting a moment Gill struck off along the bank. He moved with even greater caution. It was possible that Malloy and Harper were somewhere nearby. With a head start on him, the two might have stumbled across the stream by this time, in which case they would know that the Scalies were not too far away.

Gill moved with difficulty through the heavy growth along the bank, skirting enormous trees that arched out over the water. Huge insects with shining, rainbow-hued wings fluttered over the swift, oil-smooth flow of the stream, and brightly colored bird-like shapes darted through the branches overhead.

Once Gill came to a relatively clear space where something large and sleek crouched at the edge of the stream. It was a tiger-lizard, its powerful form and striped, scaly hide making the reason for its name immediately evident. For an instant the creature stared at Gill with its lambent, slanted eyes, then whirled with a snarl and vanished amid the undergrowth.

Gill lowered his mach-pistol with a sigh of relief and continued on. He had not gone far, when the heavy quiet was broken by a sudden high-pitched cry—a sound that might have been made by a child in pain.

He froze, listening intently. An interval of hushed silence, and then he heard a shrill whimpering. It came from somewhere close at hand. A Scalie, in serious trouble of some sort.

Thoughts racing, Gill followed the direction of the sounds. They took him a short distance further along the bank of the stream. He reached a gap in the undergrowth and here, huddled on the ground, he saw the sinuously slim, diminutive shape of a Scalie.

AT FIRST glance the native might have been mistaken for a child of Earth. Then one saw the glistening, scaly skin and the hairless head with its erect spiny crest, the inhuman little face with its tiny mouth and huge, luminous green eyes.

The Scalie stared at Gill for a moment, then attempted to dart away. But it stopped short, sprawling at full length with a thin moan of agony.

Abruptly, Gill saw why the native had been unable to flee. Something was fastened about one of its limbs, something curved and metallically gleaming. A trap, connected to a length of chain.

The trap meant Earthmen, Gill realized—most likely Malloy and Harper. But had the two deliberately set out to trap a Scalie, or had the native only been caught by accident?

Then Gill saw it had been no accident, for as he slowly moved forward his eyes were drawn by a bright glitter a few feet away, almost at face level. A gaudy bead necklace hung from a branch, over what evidently had been the original position of the trap. The piece of cheap jewelry had without question been set out as bait for a Scalie. And one had been caught.

Gill swore under his breath as swift anger surged through him. It had been a rotten thing to do. That trap had been set out with a callous disregard for the suffering it would cause.

Fear shone in the native's eyes as it watched Gill move closer. Venusians were highly intelligent, Gill knew, and apparently this one connected him with the trap. He spoke softly, in reassurance.

"Friend," he said. It was a word understood by most natives. "I'm a friend, old fellow. Understand? Easy

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now. I'm not going to hurt you. All I'm going to do is get this trap open."

The Scalie had started struggling again, but now it ceased its futile efforts and watched Gill puzzledly. Unlimbering his pack, he squatted over the trap and inserted the muzzle of his blast-gun between the jaws. Slowly he applied leverage, and in another moment the Scalie was able to withdraw its foot. It rose and sought to run, then collapsed as its injured member proved incapable of support.

"Better let me have a look at that," Gill said. He ran his fingers gently over the Scalie's tiny, oddly-jointed foot. It was badly swollen, but no bones seemed to be broken.

PRODUCING a roll of bandage from the first-aid kit in his pack, Gill bound the foot tightly. The Scalie watched these ministrations with a kind of incredulous interest.

"There!" Gill said finally. "That ought to help. And here's something by way of a consolation prize." He straightened and removed the bead necklace from where it was hanging. The Scalie took the gift eagerly, eyes shining as it examined the treasure. Then its crested head swiveled toward a spot in the undergrowth, as though having detected some sound inaudible to Gill.

"Don't move, Gill!" a harsh voice ordered in almost the same instant—Malloy's voice. "Stay just the way you are, or you'll get your blast cut dámned sudden!"

Dismay rushed through Gill in an icy flood. Momentarily he had forgotten Malloy and Harper. They had evidently been somewhere nearby, having been drawn to the scene by the Scalie's cries of pain.

Gill cursed himself for his carelessness. His mach-pistol lay atop the pack, but he knew an attempt to reach for it would be nothing more nor less than suicide. Malloy wouldn't hesitate to shoot.

"Come on, Sam!" Malloy's voice sounded again.

Thrusting leaves and branches aside, Malloy and Harper emerged from their hiding place in the undergrowth. The Scalie attempted to flee again and once more failed. It took only a few limping steps before dropping back to the ground. But in another moment it attempted to crawl away on hands and knees.

"Grab the native, Sam!" Malloy snapped. "Don't let it get away."

Harper caught the Scalie by one leg and flipped it over on its back. Producing a length of vine, which evidently he had been keeping ready for just such a purpose, he bound the frantically twisting small form.

Gill watched in helpless anger. "What's the idea, Malloy?" he demanded. "What kind of a crooked scheme have you thought up this time?"

"I'll ask the questions, Gill." With his pointed rifle as a silent reminder of mastery, Malloy stepped closer. His narrow face was creased in a thin smile. "What are you doing here? Maybe figuring to steal a jump on me and Sam, eh? Oh maybe you figured to cut our blasts, so we coudn't turn you over to the law."

"Maybe," Gill said.

"WELL, IT'S going to work the other way around," Malloy returned. "You being here saves me a lot of trouble, Gill. I was going to take care of you one way or another. I didn't like you cold-shouldering me and Sam. I didn't like it at all."

Malloy moved without any visible sign of warning. He swung the barrel of his rifle in a short, hard arc to the side of Gill's head.

Dazed with pain and shock, Gill staggered back. The rifle barrel

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whipped forward again. Gill fell, a crashing, scintillant darkness blanketing his mind.

Malloy looked down at him for a moment, his lips stretched over his teeth and his pale eyes filled with a wild glitter. Then he swung one of his heavy plastic boots in a jolting kick to Gill's side.

"That's what happens to people who get tough with me," he grated. He turned his pale eyes to Harper. "Tie his hands up, and we'll get out of here."

"Sure, Duff." Harper moved with a nervous haste, his fleshy face a little pale. He bound Gill's hands behind his back, then grasped him under the armpits and wheezingly helped him to regain his feet.

Gill swayed, holding himself erect with an effort. He felt numbed and leaden, and a dull agony beat through him in quick, heavy surges. Something warm and wet trickled down the side of his face from the spot where the rifle barrel had smashed into his head.

Malloy prodded Gill's back with his weapon. "Start moving. Sam and I made camp not far from here, and you're going to keep us company."

Guided by Malloy's harsh voice and the prods of the rifle, Gill set out through the undergrowth. Harper brought up the rear, carrying the Scalie and Gill's pack.

A SHORT time later they reached a clearing that had been made within a rough circle formed by a group of tall trees. A tent stood in the middle of this.

Gill saw that the camp site had been enclosed within a light wire-web fence, hanging from supports driven into the trees. In another moment he realized how the fragile net was able to keep out intruders—it was electrified. Malloy, evidently because he had a flitter to carry his equipment, had made his preparations on an elaborate scale.

A curt order from Malloy directed Gill to a narrow space between two of the girdling trees. There was a gate here, and Malloy waved his rifle at a spot above it. Gill suddenly noticed that photo-electric cells had been placed in each of the two trees, obviously serving to switch on and off the current that flowed through the fence.

Opening the gate now, Malloy gestured Gill through it and into the clearing. Harper followed, the Scalie thrown over one shoulder. Malloy closed the gate and once more waved his rifle between the photo-electric cells.

"Now we'll get down to business," Malloy said. He was grinning wolfishly. "Make yourself at home, Gill. You aren't going anywhere for a while. Me and Sam ain't as choosy about guests as you are."

Gill said slowly, "This business of yours has a rotten smell to me. Why did you set a trap for this Scalie, Malloy? What are you going to do with it?"

"What I'm after is bio-pearls, see?" Malloy returned with a confiding air. "Now, I found out that this region is one of the few places where they grow—and the Scalies know just where to look for them."

"I've guessed that much," Gill said.

Malloy looked sardonic. "Yeah? But here's the kick-back. The Scalies don't use bio-pearls to trade with as a rule. There's religion and taboos mixed up in it. They know you and like you, they just up and give them to you, see? Their religion lets them do that.

"Now, I don't figure to waste time cozying up to the tribe here. I like to work quick and fast. So I worked out a way to put the right kind of pressure in the right place, to get

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quick results. You know about the Scalies being what they call telepathic, Gill?"

"THEY AREN'T actually telepathic," Gill said. "They can't exchange thoughts or anything like that. What they have is a sort of hyper-sensitivity to each other's emotions, and this operates only over a limited distance. Men have that sensivity on a smaller scale, especially in crowds, when the result is often mob madness. The Scalies, though, have a constant, communal sharing of emotions. Within any particular tribe, what is felt by one is felt by all."

"That's it," Malloy said. "That's exactly why I wanted this Scalie, here." He gestured with his rifle at the trussed figure of the native, which Harper had deposited on the ground before the tent. "You see, Gill, if I sort of hurt this Scalie, it'll be like hurting the whole tribe at the same time. And I figure if I hurt the tribe long enough, I can make them give me all the bio-pearls they have—and show me where to find more. A clean sweep, Gill! I'll be one of the richest men in the System!"

Dismayed understanding struck Gill. He felt sickened. "But, great space, Malloy, you couldn't be mean enough to do anything like that to the Scalies!" he protested. "It...why, it would be a kind of mass-torture! The Scalies are like children. They're physically too delicate for—"

"Keep out of this, Gill!" Malloy snapped. "Don't get in my way or I'll give you another sample of what you got a while ago. Just remember, you ain't in any spot where you can worry about other people Now, sit down and shut up."

Scowling, Malloy turned to Harper. "Get the stuff ready, Sam."

The squat man hurried into the tent, returning with a tiny, compact electric power unit and a length of insulated wire. He busied himself with these, while Malloy peered intently into the surrounding forest.

"The Scalies know we've captured one of their tribe by now," he muttered. "They ought to show up pretty soon—if they ain't here already."

HE WAITED, keeping watch. Harper brought a whisky bottle from the tent, and Malloy drank from this repeatedly as the minutes passed. Suddenly he stiffened.

"They're here all right!"

Gill saw them then. The slender, tiny shapes of the Scalies had materialized like wraiths amid the undergrowth. They stood in a silent ring about the camp, watching. The captured Scalie near the tent called out to them in its shrill tones, and from the gathering rose a wailing murmur.

Malloy chuckled. "Let's get busy, Sam." He squatted beside the power unit, taking the free ends of the wires in his fingers. While Harper held the Scalie, he touched the bare ends of the wires to the native's skin.

Gill winced at what happened next. The power unit evidently was adjusted so that its current was just strong enough to cause a shock—a painful shock—to the hypersensitive nervous system of a Scalie. Malloy's captive released a piercing shriek. And an instant later that shriek was echoed by the dozens of Scalies ringing the camp. The result was a nerve-shattering din as the communal, emotion-sharing sense of each individual native present reacted to the torment being suffered by their luckless member.

Malloy laughed, his pale eyes glittering with sadistic enjoyment. Again he made contact with the wires he held, and again a discordant chorus of agony rose from the Scalies.

Gill gritted his teeth against the uproar, fury blazing through him. He

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wrenched against the vines that kept his hands imprisoned behind his back, but the fibrous growth was too strong to stretch or snap.

Then Gill remembered a bit of forest lore he had once heard. The vines were too strong to break, but they could quite easily be picked apart. Heart hammering in sudden excitement, he began working on his bonds with a thumbnail.

Shriek after shriek rose from the Scalies. Malloy's mouth was twisted in a leer, his pale eyes held an animal pleasure. Harper was beginning to look sick.

AND THEN a sleek, powerful form thudded to the ground near the tent, apparently having dropped out of the empty air. It was a tiger-lizard. It crouched, snarling, staring about as though in bewilderment.

Gill realized what had happened. The tiger-lizard had been somewhere close to the camp. Retreating before the approach of the Scalie tribe, it had not found escape. Confused and terrified by the mind-wrenching racket from the assembled Scalies, it had somehow lost its footing in the overhead branches and fallen.

Now the tiger-lizard flashed into motion. It bounded toward the electrified fence, seeking to scale its way to freedom. The instant it touched the wireweb, however, it screamed and fell back to the ground. It lay a moment, stunned. Then it was a streaking thing, fired by mindless panic.

Malloy forgot the Scalie he had been torturing. Fright had driven the sadistic pleasure from his narrow face. Shouting at Harper, he seized his rifle and began shooting wildly at the blurred shape of the tiger-lizard as the creature whirled around the camp in a futile effort to find a gap in the fence through which it could flee. The crashing of the rifle added fresh fuel

Again the tiger-lizard hurled itself at the fence, tearing at the wire-web with its razor-sharp claws. And again it fell back, rolling over the ground until it hit the tent. The structure collapsed under the impact of the creature's heavy body, and it slashed madly at the entangling folds of the plastic material.

Harper had obtained his own rifle now, and he joined Malloy in firing a wild barrage into the turbulently billowing folds of the tent. It seemed incredible that the tiger-lizard could escape unscathed, but somehow, in the violently pinwheeling confusion, it did. It shot suddenly from the shrouding folds of the tent—straight at Malloy. Its powerful forelegs, tipped with steely claws, swatted instinctively at the threatening figure that loomed before it, a burst of motion almost too swift to be seen.

MALLOY reeled back with a torn throat, his face a horrible ragged mask. But his last shots had hit the tiger-lizard. The creature staggered drunkenly as it started once more toward the fence.

Harper stopped it with a blast from his rifle, then turned to stare dazedly down at Malloy. Blood was welling from the man's ripped face and throat. It was clear that Malloy would never scheme again.

Harper was still staring when Gill slipped the last strands of the vines from his wrists and came up silently behind him. The rifle was torn suddenly from the squat man's loosened grip. Harper whirled with a startled bleat, and met Gill's fist as it swung in a vengeful arc. Harper went down in a boneless sprawl.

Gill shook his head incredulously as he glanced around him. A few chaotic seconds, and all torment and threat were over. Malloy had perished in the very chain-reaction he had started.

Gill's eyes touched the bound Scalie.

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It lay watching him. Still visible traces of suffering showed in its expression, but understanding seemed present there, together with relief and trust.

"This is over with for you and your people, too, old fellow," Gill muttered. He dropped down beside the native's tiny figure and unfastened its bonds. Then, with the Scalie cradled in his arms, he went over to the fence. He turned off the current and opened the gate, lowering his burden to the ground beyond.

"Go ahead," Gill said softly. "Go on home." He strode back into the camp. No use trying to trade with the Scalies now, he thought bitterly.

A groan from Harper warned that the man was recovering consciousness. Gill bound the squat man's hands with a length of vine.

"*Kaa-hai!* Anybody there?" A human voice was calling.

"*Kaa-hai!*" Gill called back. "Come ahead."

TWO MEN in drizzle-suits and carrying rifles appeared out of the forest.

Harper, fully awake now, suddenly moaned. "The law!"

"Sam Harper, eh?" one of the men said. "Well, this is the end of the outlaw trail for you." He suddenly stared. "Oh, oh! There's Duff Malloy—and not nice to look at, either. What happened here?" The man studied Gill.

Swiftly, Gill explained the events that had led to Malloy's death. The marshal—as the badge visible through his drizzle-suit indicated—began an explanation of his own.

"My partner and I trailed Malloy and Harper into this part of the country. A young woman at the settlement got word of our mission—"

"My wife," Gill said.

The marshal nodded. "She was badly worried about you. She told us we could most likely find you at the Scalie village here. So we flew out. We found the village deserted, but we heard a commotion in the forest and investigation led us here. Glad Malloy and Harper are the ones that got hurt. They're wanted for a dozen robberies and at least two murders, not to mention contract-busting into the bargain."

Harper suddenly pointed an accusing finger at Gill: "If contract-busters is what you want, you're looking right at one! Check his prints and you'll see if I'm right!"

"That so?" the marshal said slowly. "Afraid we'll have to look into that, young fellow. And if Harper's right—"

HE SHRUGGED, and Gill knew what was left unsaid. Eight years of virtual slavery. Eight years of being watched and driven.

He thought of Hazel. Abruptly, he felt sick.

Watching Gill's face, Harper laughed in triumph. "That kind of evens up the score, Gill."

The marshal jerked his head at his companion, keeping guard as Gill's blast-gun and the rifle were taken away from him. Then he said gruffly, "All right, let's get started."

As Gill strode leadenly toward the gate, a small figure limped through the opening. It was the Scalie he had released only a short time before.

"Fwen," the Scalie said.

Gill saw the huge, luminous eyes fixed on him, saw the trust in them. He grinned crookedly. "Friend," he said. "Sure, old fellow."

The Scalie extended one tiny hand. "Fwen," it said again.

"Want to shake, eh?" Gill stretched out his own hand, engulfing with it the native's small one. Then he felt the two round objects against his palm. And an instant later he was staring down at the bio-pearls, each large and flawless in its radiant beauty.

Dazedly he realized that what he held was freedom for himself and life and happiness on Earth for Hazel.

THE END

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With a great deal of hilarity, the bodies were piled into the blazing bonfire

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By Paul W. Fairman

All an undertaker needs to be successful are a few stiffs and some orders for lavish funerals. But the Zedans preferred a bonfire followed by a banquet . . .

MARTY HAINES, New Projects Director for Galactic Developments Unlimited, had a great deal on his mind. What with the Delos 4 poultry farms not going too well, the Garth 2 lumber mills showing too small a profit, and the Old Man continually yowling for more expansion, Marty's days and nights were filled with frustration. He was up as usual at a quarter past eight, and while he gobbled his morning synthetics he penciled notations in a small book he always carried:

(1) Remember to make pass at new secretary.

(2) Ethegram insult to Barkley too slow getting in Zeda 3 report.

(3) Do level best with secretary.

(4) Be out of office when Old Man yells for analysis of Zeda 3 report.

(5) If forced to leave office, invite new sec. for quick cocktail.

Marty finished his breakfast and caught the nine-five gyro downtown, arriving in the office at nine-eleven. Nor Kye, the Inner Venusian babe who cluttered up Marty's early morning notes, was already at her desk. Marty smiled engagingly. "New broom, eh?" he said by way of greeting. Lord she was luscious! These Venusian women, while curiously variable, were more humanoid than some humans.

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Nor Kye looked slightly bewildered. "Broom?" She glanced at the floor, then reached for her Terran-Venusian Dictionary.

"Never mind," Marty said. "It's just an expression. A very old one. It means people are always prompt on a new job."

"But I am prompt on any job, Mr. Haines. The company is paying for my time. They are entitled to—"

Marty broke in by laying his hand on hers. He didn't have to check on her marital status. That's what made it nice about Venusian girls. They never married. Family life did not exist on Venus, so a wedding ring would have been pointless.

Marty said, "That's what I wanted to ask you about—your time. How about meeting me after work in the—"

The Venusian dish withdrew her hand and patted her crystal-bright hair. She'd been on Terra only a week, but evidently passes were also made on Venus.

"That report came in, Mr. Haines."

"Marty to you. What report?"

"The one from Mr. Barkley on Zeda 3."

Venusian eyes had a peculiar magnetic quality that held one. "Oh, yes, the Zeda 3 report. Tell me—just how do Venusian girls make their selections when the time comes to—"

Nor Kye blushed and held forth a long sheet of yellow paper upon which had been transcribed an ethegram. "The report, Mr. Haines. I'm sure Mr. Hendricks will be waiting for your analysis."

"You bet. The Old Man's been grousing for a week. He wants to get going on Zeda 3. You know where the Zeda group is, of course."

"Yes. I made a point of looking it up."

"It's a five-planet group in the Sixteenth Spacial Sector. Only one planet inhabited, however. They've just recently—"

NOR KYE smiled. "—just recently been admitted to the Cosmic Federation. Before admission is granted, the government and the citizens of any planet must conform to certain requirements of the Cosmic Charter. They accept and use the Universal Language. Federation Agents check and verify that government is of the people's choice, whatever form it may take—"

Marty reached for Nor Kye's hand in a burst of enthusiasm. "Say! You really have read the books! I'll see the Old Man immediately about getting you a raise!"

Nor Kye repossessed her hand. "Don't you think you'd better check the report, Mr.—"

Marty held up a warning finger.

"—oh, all right. Don't you think you'd better check the report, Marty?"

"That's better." Marty Haines took the yellow sheet and began folding it. But he was loath to go about his duties. "Do you know the reason for this report?"

"Yes, I—"

"After a planet or group has been accepted into the Federation, it is immediately thrown open to exploitation ...er...ah...I mean commercial trade restrictions are set aside and the said planet or group is allowed to participate in the benefits of universal trade and commingling."

"I understand perfectly, Marty, and if I can be of any help, please let me know. In the meantime—"

"I get it. But you'll find Terrans far more persistent than Venusians. That's why we're a more up-and-coming planet. Get your strength back, honey, while I check this report."

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Marty Haines went into his private office, placed his feet comfortably on his desk, and concentrated on Barkley's ethegram.

To:
Martin Haines
New Projects Director
Galactic Developments Unlimited
Lunar Building
Chicago 9, Illinois
U. S. A., Terra

From:
June 6, 2743
Samuel Barkley, Investigator
Galactic Devs. Unlimited
Spaceman's Hotel
Rhudo Center
Zeda 3

Dear Marty:

I'm afraid this one is strictly for the nix-list. If I'm any judge, we want no part of this unholy ball of mud. After giving Zeda 3 the once-over, my only reaction is one of revulsion and contempt. I want only to finish and get away from here. But wait until I tell you, and to make things official I'd better put it into some semblance of abstract report. But I'm warning you—hold your nose while you read.

Zeda 3 is the only populated planet of the group by that name located (see Becker's Galactic Chart X430) and serviced by an expanding atomic-fission sun, the life-period of which is calculated as immeasurable. The other four planets of the group are airless and of low valuable mineral content. They can be completely charged off.

The Zeda Group was discovered by the Third Lomax Expedition in the year 2235. We have no details of its findings because the Lomax Spacer was partially destroyed when coming Terraside on its return trip. Most of the expedition's records were destroyed and we have only the bare statement of the landing as recorded on the log wire.

Their arrival on Zeda 3 is verified, however, by an ancient statue of Wilbur Lomax which still stands in Rhudo Center.

Though much smaller than Terra—about half its size—the planet is similar in so many ways, geographically, climatically, etc., that the exceptions are hardly worth noting.

It is of interest, however, that there has apparently never been any tribal life on the planet. Its entire population is of a single race and is under a single government. They are a peaceful people and there is no record of a major war ever occurring on Zeda 3. A few local disputes have always been settled by arbitration.

The inhabitants are humanoid, and physically are almost identical to Terrans. I might go as far as to say suspiciously similar.

An examination of available history shows they have been improving themselves constantly, especially in the last four hundred years. They deliberately set about using the knowledge gained from irregular contact with other more advanced Systems, until now there is little in the way of commercial possibilities to be found on the planet.

Yet, with all this progress and modernism, there is an appalling backwardness among the population—a spiritual backwardness beyond belief.

Zedans have no respect whatever for the dead. If you could have seen what I saw, you would agree this planet should be given a wide berth by any responsible company. Though they seem to get along well among themselves—at least to all appearances—they treat their dead with such callous disrespect as to be an infallible indication of their true and disgusting natures.

On three different occasions—after a death had occurred in a family—I personally witnessed surviving relatives dragging the deceased out the front door by one leg and deposit the body in a refuse cart that hauled it away to the city dump!

Conditions in this respect are appalling. Bodies have been left lying in back alleys until the garbage disposal unit comes to cart them off.

The sight of such wanton callousness has so unnerved me that I've fallen behind in my investigations. This is only a partial report for that reason. I'll finish my work, of course, and send a complete report as soon as possible. But I'm sure we want nothing to do with Zeda 3. The very name sickens me—a veteran investigator—and I'll be most happy to finish up and take the first spacer out of this accursed System.

Regards, Sam

UPON FINISHING the report, Marty Haines stared pensively at his feet for several minutes. "Hmmm. Old Sam Barkley must be slipping. In the old days he'd have been the first man up with the logical answer to this report. We'll have to see about pensioning him off."

Marty put his feet on the floor and yelled, "Nor Kye!"

The Venusian doll appeared almost immediately, but with a reproving frown on her face. "Mr. Haines! Really! There is a buzzer on your desk

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that connects with—"

"Skip it, angel. I like the sound of your name and I want to hear it at every opportunity." He leered at her. "You wouldn't like to—"

"No! Of course not!"

"Then how about—"

"I wouldn't think of it. Here in broad daylight!"

"That's true, so we'll just—"

"Mr. Haines! Is there something you wanted?"

"Yes," Marty sighed. "There is. Take a letter."

"Very well. I'm ready."

And the next day, a Mr. Joshua Blunt received the following message from Galactic Developments Unlimited:

To:
Joshua Blunt
Director
Undertaking and Cemetery Division
Galactic Developments Unlimited
Corcoran Building
Cleveland 4, Ohio

From:
June 7th 2743
Martin Haines
New Projects Director
Galactic Devs. Unlimited
Lunar Building
Chicago 9, Ill.

Dear Josh:

First allow me to congratulate you upon the marvelous job you did on Extide 7. Only an exceedingly stubborn genius would have thought of bringing soil across void to a metal planet in order that the natives could place their cherished dead in grass-covered graves rather than in holes cut with an oxy-acetelyne torch. As a result of your efforts, the Undertaking and Cemetery Division is fast becoming one of Galactic's most profitable sub-heads. It is now exceeded in volume by only the Amusement Park and the Ice Cream Machine Divisions. Excellent work.

And now I have another assignment for you. I am enclosing herewith Sam Barkley's report on Zeda 3, and I'm pretty sure a single quick reading will open your eyes to the great opportunity for service existing on that planet. We of Galactic consider this a challenge and we will not fail! The unfortunate people of Zeda 3 must be lifted up out of the moral mire which holds them down. They must learn respect for their deceased. They must be taught the meaning of that holy phrase, "Our Honored Dead." I can visualize the day when Galactic will operate ten thousand funeral homes on Zeda 3. You, Joshua, shall be the flag bearer in this great crusade. Go with my blessing!

Sincerely,
Martin Haines

P. S. And watch your expense account. It was a little high on your last trip.

NOR KYE had dinner with Marty three days later. He took her to the exclusive Planetary Charter Club where a kind word from the head-waiter cost fifteen unicredits. After their third dance, Marty said, "Look, angel, what's the trouble? You seem on edge. Don't you like our planet?"

Nor Kye, her heart-stopping Venusian eyes partly shuttered, played delicately with her cocktail glass. "Marty, there *is* something. This Zeda 3 project. Aren't you driving ahead a little fast? After all, Barkley's report was only a partial."

Marty smiled expansively. "That's my gal. Loyal. Loyal to the core. Worrying about business instead of having a good time. Waiter, more Mercury Water."

"I'm serious, Marty. Until you have all your facts, you should step carefully. That real-estate man you sent out today. He'll obligate you for millions."

"Sure, angel. But you don't get it. If we own all the cemeteries, we've got to buy up land and get started laying them out. And a string of undertaking parlors will take a lot of buildings. Now's the time to step in before some other promoters get wind of what we're doing and beat us to it."

Nor Kye appeared genuinely troubled. She started to speak, changed her

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mind and gazed almost tenderly at Marty. Marty grinned back. "Don't worry, honey. You just don't understand business. There are times you can't wait for facts. You've got to depend on your instinct."

"But suppose there's something important—really important—that Barkley hasn't found out yet? Suppose the Zedans don't *want* to bury their dead?"

Marty, floating on the bubbles of eleven Mercurian cocktails, laid a finger beside his nose after missing twice. "Angel, you reckon without Joshua Blunt. Give him a black coat and a pair of white gloves and he's dynamite. Dynamite I tell you! He'll have those Zedans walking in funeral processions by the thousands."

"It might not be as easy as you think."

The bubbles cleared partially and Marty blinked with some semblance of sobriety. "Wait a minute, baby. Are you ahead of me? Is there something you know?"

Nor Kye took his hand and squeezed it tenderly while Marty got drunk all over again on her smile. "Of course not, darling. Let's dance while you tell me about some of your early promotions. They must have been terrific."

Grinning foolishly, Marty led her to the floor. "They were. You know, when Mars opened up I found they didn't have any birds up there. So I sold old Zut, the Lord of the Planet, ten thousand sparrows from Terra."

"But Marty—the atmosphere is too thin! A bird can't fly on Mars."

"That's what the Zut found out after I left."

A new shading came into Nor Kye's manner. A cold shading. "Then you're nothing more than a plain crook!"

"Am not a crook! You do me 'ninjustice. I went back and sold the Zut a cargo of transparent globes and showed him how to fill them with air. Put two sparrows in each bowl. Presto! Big novelty. Sold like mad. Old Zut got rich."

Nor Kye laughed. "Marty, it's an awfully dirty trick to play on you, but you can kiss me if you want to."

"Baby—here in all this light?"

"There are darker places."

EXACTLY one week later, Marty came down to the office to find Joshua Blunt's first report waiting. Nor Kye handed him the ethegram and Marty was enchanted by the not-too-well-hidden laughter in her eyes.

Marty had had a good night's sleep. He was showered, shaved, in love, and very happy. "Morning, sweet. What's the joke?"

"No joke, Marty. Just the general run of business. Ethegram from Blunt." Marty took it into his office and read it.

To:
Martin Haines
New Projects Dir.
Gal. Devs. Unlimited
Lunar Bldg.
Chicago 9, Ill.
U. S. A., Terra

From:
June 17, 2743
Joshua Blunt, Director
Und. and Cem. Div.
Gal. Devs. Unlimited
Municipal Jail
Rhudo Center, Zeda 3

Dear Marty:

I am in jail! I, Joshua Blunt, a man of dignity, representative of a giant corporation, a person overflowing with love and compassion, have been thrown in the jug like a common criminal. This is the nadir of my existence—my greatest humiliation. And I am guilty of nothing more than a desire to help these crude, unfeeling Zedans, as you will see when I give you the details.

Immediately upon receiving your letter in Cleveland, I approached the cashier and replenished my wallet, after which I caught the first spacer for Zeda 3—all as per your instructions. It was an invigorating flight, during which, through meditation and

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contemplation, I built within myself a bright fire of resolve—aye, resolve to put these Zedans on the true path of decency and respect for loved ones who have gone where the woodbine twineth. During recreational periods, I allowed my mind to dwell sparingly upon the picture of ten thousand funeral parlors scattered about the planet; upon the vision of unnumbered cemeteries, cool and green, beautifying many landscapes; and upon the substantial raise and the healthy bonus I will merit by doing this job as it should be done.

So I arrived at the Rhudo Center Spaceport in fine fettle for the job ahead. A quick survey of the situation revealed my wisdom in bringing with me a certain amount of necessary equipment: mortuary instruments, a supply of formaldahyde, folding chairs, and several fine caskets.

Before attempting to achieve any client contacts, I rented a likely-looking establishment, fitted it out, and placed the caskets in conspicuous places. I then went into the outskirts of the center and purchased a ten-acre plot of land in a restful, tree-studded area, ideally suited to our purpose.

Incidentally, I did very well on both deals, driving bargains that represent quite a savings to Galactic Devs., a detail which I hope you will remember come bonus time.

Ready now to be of reverent service to the Zedans, I dressed carefully and went forth to establish contacts. And I discovered to my horror that Sam Barkley's report was not exaggerated. These people haven't the first concepts of decent treatment of the dead. I visited the refuse areas to find bodies piled in careless heaps here and there. It is utterly beyond all belief! They have deep pits into which the remains of their loved ones are thrown when the piles get too high and are destroyed with chemicals. Sick at heart, I returned to the city and discovered fresh horror—wagons picking up bodies thrown thoughtlessly into alleys and hauling them away without a tear or a prayer. I tell you it was enough to shake a man to his foundations.

But being made of stern stuff indeed, I set my jaw and began knocking on doors. The Zedans, as Sam Barkley said, are humanoid and look a great deal like Terrans. The best I can do by way of description is to say they are very poor facsimiles thereof. Did you ever see pictures of "Mamma" and "Poppa" drawn with a crayon by a four-year-old? Well, that in a sense is what the Zedans look like. You'll have to see them yourself for a more accurate picture.

They are entirely affable, however, and are sincere and almost childlike in trying to make one feel at home among them.

On my first call I was greeted by what would no doubt be considered a very pretty young Zedan housewife. But evolution has been lazy on this planet and about the only term I can think of to describe the girl is "fuzzy". Done with a crayon, so to speak.

She smiled and I introduced myself. She was agreeable but unimpressed. Our conversation went something like this:

"I have come to help the Zedans redeem themselves in the eyes of all the galaxies."

"That is fine."

"The worlds have noted with horror the callousness and disrespect with which you treat your dead."

"Huh?"

"I said, there is a condition upon this planet which must be altered before you, as Galactic citizens, can hold up your heads and command the respect of your fellow beings."

"How much does it cost?"

"The charges levied for a Galactic Developments funeral including casket, plot, headstone, and all services are amazingly low. They run from three hundred to eleven hundred unicredits, depending upon—"

"I don't think I want one."

"One what?"

"A funeral. Do you have the brushes?"

"Madam, you do not understand—"

"A Mr. Fuller came with brushes he said were samples, but he wouldn't let go of them. He took my unicredits and said he would send the brushes later. I thought you had brought the brushes."

I could see I was wasting my time in this particular household. I said, "Madam, if you paid Mr. Fuller for brushes you will get them. The firm has an excellent reputation. Good day."

I knocked on other doors, arriving always at the same frustrating deadlock in slightly devious ways, until I became completely discouraged. But discouragement to Joshua Blunt is merely a challenge, and I recognized the need for drastic action. Some spectacular piece of publicity had to be achieved and by sheer luck the opportunity to achieve it came my way.

This occurred when I passed a very prosperous-looking house and saw the body of a man—some husband, son, or brother—lying ignored and untended on the grass beside a grape arbor.

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My plan formed instantly. I made note of the street and address. Then with grim resolve I entered upon the premises and discovered, as I had suspected, that the body was stone-cold dead. I threw it over my shoulder and went with all possible haste to my newly-rented undertaking establishment.

Now I went feverishly to work. My plan was simple. I would give this man a decent burial whether his family liked it or not. By actually letting them see the dignity and beauty of a correct Galactic interment, they would become sold on proper funeral procedures as they had obviously been sold on Fuller brushes. No doubt the brush salesman had made some demonstrations. So also would I.

I swiftly embalmed the body, but as I was applying flattering cosmetics the front door opened and two Zedans stormed in. They came right on through the place and confronted me in my workroom.

They were a male and a female, and of the two the male seemed the more upset. "Here's the body, Zizz!" he yelled. Go call a policeman!"

The female did as she was bidden. The male was mad as a hornet. He said, "Stealing bodies, eh? Thought you could get away with it, eh? Figured we couldn't follow you, eh? Thought we were stupid, eh?"

He stopped talking and began glumly examining the body, thus giving me a chance to get in some persuasive explanation before the law arrived. "You don't understand," I said. "This is really for your own good. I am merely trying to show, by direct action, the correct way to proceed in these matters. I am sure you will thank me when—"

He was examining the cadaver closely. "What you done to this?"

"I have treated it with the reverence and respect it is entitled to."

"It smells funny."

"That is the embalming fluid." Sensing a change in his manner I explained the process of embalming and how the proper use of cosmetics could hide blemishes and cover the ravages of disease. Before he could react, the female returned with a uniformed minion of the law and I saw that I was wrong in feeling the male's attitude had changed.

"I want this Terran arrested. He stole this body and now look at it. He shot it full of some kind of stuff and smeared it all up. I wanted him arrested."

The policeman was eager to do what he considered to be his duty, so I was escorted to the lockup and even now languish in durance vile. My hearing will come up day after tomorrow. I hope, in the meantime, you will get in touch with the authorities by ethegram and take responsibility for what amount the fine will be. In the meantime, I will sit here and gird up my courage for the job ahead. I have a feeling it will be fraught with unforeseen difficulties.

Sincerely,

Joshua Blunt

P. S. Also, I will strongly protest any attempt of the company to dock me for the time I remain in jail. Such tactics would be entirely unfair to a loyal employee who is only trying to do his best.

A VAGUE uneasiness stirred within Marty Haines as he finished reading Joshua Blunt's ethegram. Had his instincts played him false in this Zeda 3 deal? He had fallen down before during the spectacular rise which had made him the youngest major executive in the history of Galactic. But had fallen down so seldom that his brilliant successes remained completely untarnished.

There had been that fur coat deal on Frigex 4 where the natives had appeared on the verge of freezing to death until it was discovered that they had thick fur under their skins rather than over it. And the cargo of false teeth to the Iginites who absorbed their food from sunlight. Failures, financial booby traps, but only small marks against a shining record.

For a moment, Marty wished he *had* waited for the final from Sam Barkley. He took a deep breath and yelled, "Nor Kye!"

The Venusian girl came rushing in. "Marty! For heaven's sake! When will you learn to use the buzzer?"

Marty eyed her with a certain mixture of emotions. He was completely gone on Nor Kye. That he admitted. But he wasn't at all satisfied with his progress. No more beautiful a woman existed since the infamous days of the Venusian flesh factories. He hungered for her, drooled for her; even

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had thoughts of marrying her, though he realized a proposal of marriage meant nothing at all to a Venusian female. Nine out of ten of them were willing and eager to the point of monotony. But not Nor Kye.

It was maddening, Marty thought, to get so far and no further. Close enough to the garden to smell the flowers, but always there were thorns to prevent plucking. Or a "Keep Off the Grass" sign. Or maybe even a hive of hornets.

"Kiss me," he said.

Nor Kye kissed him and seemed to enjoy it.

"Anything else?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. Let's—"

"No."

"Is it fun torturing me?"

"I don't mean to."

"I'll get you some needles."

"Please don't."

"How about the affairs of Galactic? These are business hours."

"Oh, all right. What have you heard from Sam Barkley? Isn't it about time for his final report?"

"WE GOT word this morning that Sam is very sick. He's returning to Terran for treatment."

"That's too bad. But never mind this morning. What about tonight?"

"I'm going to be busy."

"Those damned art lessons again?"

"Anatomy lessons, my sweet. I plan to better myself."

"I'm pretty good at anatomy. I'd like to give you a lesson."

"I'm sure you would."

Marty sighed. "How about tomorrow night?"

"School. I'm taking a course in promotion and business management. I'll be free on Wednesday, though."

"Fine, I'll—"

"Marty. Marty. *Marty!* MARTY HAINES!'

Marty got lazily to his feet. "The Old Man," he growled. "Why doesn't he learn to use a buzzer?"

He went in to find out what the Old Man wanted, and it seemed everything had gone to hell on Sixtas 9.

Some sort of dermatitis had hit the frogs—forty million of them on the frog farms there in the swamps. And the frog-hair for which they were raised had slipped seven points in tensile strength.

So Marty kissed his secretary Nor Kye a fond goodbye and took the next spacer out.

HE RETURNED eleven days later and found Nor Kye, efficient, luscious, heartbreaking, seated at her desk.

"An ethegram from Zeda 3," she said. "I held it for you."

"Good or bad?" He had the yellow sheet and was halfway toward the door to his office.

"Martin Haines!"

"Eh?"

"You forgot to kiss me."

He went back. "Figure the knife might have slid out a little, babe? You're the damndest woman!" He kissed her.

"Marty—I'm sorry. Truly I am. I've been miserable."

He leered. "Big night tonight?"

"Anatomy school."

"Damn."

Nor Kye watched through troubled eyes as he slammed the door to his office.

He glowered, threw down his hat, propped his feet on the desk, and read the ethegram from Zeda 3.

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To:
Martin Haines
New Projects Director
Galactic Developments Unlimited
Lunar Building
Chicago 9, Illinois
U. S. A., Terra

From:
July 2, 2743
Joshua Blunt, Director,
Und. and Cem. Div.
Gal. Devs. Unlimited.
Municipal Insane Asylum
Rhudo Center, Zeda 3

Dear Marty:

Indignity heaped upon insult! Ridicule piled on embarrassment! Here on Zeda 3—one of the most backward planets in the known cosmos—I, Joshua Blunt, one of the most brilliant intellects of my generation, am incarcerated within the grim walls of an insane asylum! Tie that, chum!

I am still bewildered at the chain of events which brought about this monstrous miscarriage of justice. I sit by the hour asking, why—why—why? But the other inmates leave me strictly alone. The attendants push my food in at the end of a long stick. And nobody answers.

I was only trying to do my duty as heaven and Galactic gave me to see that duty, and I still don't know what happened. After I outline my movements to you in this report, maybe you can find the joker. It must be there. Please tell me why I failed, and get me out of this dump.

You will remember I terminated my last report to you while languishing in jail. And I very much appreciate the promptness with which Galactic ethered responsibility for my fine which came to five hundred Zedacredits and which, I sincerely hope, Galactic won't deduct from my niggardly salary.

My trial was brief, before a fuzzy-looking judge who levied the fine after listening to that pair of Zedans testify that I had stolen a body from their yard. When I asked for the right to testify in my own defense, the judge refused permission, saying anyone who had committed such an act couldn't possibly have a defense.

I didn't object to any great degree because I wanted only to get out of that jail and into the blessed sunshine once more. But as I returned to my hotel room, the answer to the great question still evaded me:

Why would people who left the dead body of a relative lying carelessly in the front yard set up such a howl when another person came along and carried it away?

Strange indeed are these Zedans. Finally I gave off mulling the problem and concentrated my energies upon a new program. A man of lesser courage than myself might have given up, but not Joshua Blunt. I walked the floor until far into the night and had a program worked out before I closed my eyes in sleep.

It reasoned out this way. My main problem was to somehow arrange a funeral so these callous heathen could see how the thing went; could drink in the simple grandeur of the Galactic service and burial; could ponder its simple but majestic beauty as against their own barbarous method. Only then could they be put into the correct frame of mind to part with a few credits and start the ball rolling in a satisfactory financial manner.

So far I had not been able to arrange a funeral, but I still had my most potent weapon in reserve. The temptation of monetary return.

You well know how it pains Joshua Blunt to pay out money at a time when money should be coming to us. But I am not so shortsighted as to rebel against necessity. So, the following morning, I chose another part of town and began patrolling the streets.

I was not so fortunate this time in finding a likely prospect. The garbage wagon, it seemed, had been through recently and things were pretty well cleaned up. I went all day and far into the next morning before I was fortunate enough to see a frail female dragging a husky male body through her backyard and appearing quite annoyed with having to so exert herself.

I approached her with my best sad smile. She dropped the body to the walk, wiped her hands together, and smiled back.

"Madam," I said, "I see you have lost a loved one. May I offer my condolences?"

"How much are they?"

"You don't understand. I wish to extend my sympathy, entirely complimentary, at your great loss."

"Oh. Did you bring the brushes?"

"What brushes?"

"The Fuller Brush man was here and—"

I remembered. It seemed the Fuller Company had a very thoroughgoing salesman on Zeda 3. A black mark, I might say, against our own brush division, which was

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no doubt caught napping. I interrupted her with a wave of my hand. "Oh, yes. No, I am not that estimable company's emissary, but I understand they have a great many deliveries to make. Your brushes will no doubt arrive in a very few days. Meantime, however, I have a proposition which may interest you."

"How much is it?"

"There is no expense whatever to you. In fact, the Undertaking and Cemetery Division of Galactic Developments, in order to introduce their special type of service to this community, wish to not only present you with a complete funeral for your departed dear one, but to make you a bereavement gift of a thousand Zedacredits."

The lady slid over the free funeral like a fish down a wet rock and came right to the money. "A thousand Zedacredits? For nothing?"

"For aiding us in showing what perfect service we can render the community."

"Oh, I knew there was a catch. How do I help you?"

The thickheadedness of these Zedans was beyond all conception. But I refused to let it throw me. There was more conversation, but in the end I prevailed.

I had a little trouble in getting the woman to pose as a heartbroken widow. In fact, I had to threaten to withhold the gift. Even then she broke her word. She had promised to be at the funeral parlor on the following morning complete in widow's black, but instead she sent a friend. A blonde of diametrically opposite coloring than herself. But this blonde was appropriately dressed, so I decided she would suffice.

There was no lack of attendance. Zedans came by the hundreds, though I must say their decorum was shocking. They treated the affair as a picnic more than a funeral. Certain hooligans in the crowd were positively hilarious, and I got very little cooperation from the Zedan police. How I longed for a few good Irish cops to put the fear of God into these heathens.

I did the best I could, however, and after the services, the procession got under way. It was then that disaster struck, mad, incomprehensible disaster.

The actual getting-under-way of the procession seemed to wipe out whatever sense of decency was left in the crowd. Suddenly, from all sides, we were deluged by a hailstorm of merriment. Uncontrolled laughter broke out and spread like wildfire, until the procession was brought to a complete halt by milling merrymakers, who seemed to interpret the solemn occasion as some sort of a carnival.

At this point an official-looking person accosted me, along with several policemen, and took me into custody. This man identified himself as the Director of Public Safety, and claimed the public was unsafe so long as I remained free. I was given a hearing before a board of pompous-looking fools who whispered among themselves for a while and then sent me to this place. Imagine this final humiliation! Put into an insane asylum for conducting a dignified funeral.

Come and get me out of here. I—

MARTY HAINES did not finish the letter. Scowling, he tossed it on his desk and yelled, "Nor Kye!"

The Venusian beauty hurried into the office, and for once did not mention the buzzer.

"I've got to go to Zeda 3," Marty said. "Make reservations."

Nor Kye smiled alluringly. "For two?"

"What do you mean—for two?"

"I thought possibly you'd need some help. It sounds like a big problem. I'd like to go along."

Marty eyed her with calculation, as though trying to spot any cracks in the armour. "It's the accepted thing," he said, "that when a man takes his secretary on an intergalactic jaunt he expects—"

"I know, but a spacer leaves for the Zeda Group in about forty-five minutes. Maybe certain things should be discussed later."

"I'll meet you at the space port," Marty said.

After their first dinner together, Nor Kye pleaded a headache and retired to her cabin. Marty suspected no duplicity because the girl appeared drawn, nervous and somewhat pale, which was very exceptional for Venusians.

She stayed in her cabin all the following day while Marty played poker with several acquaintances. They came landside at Rhudo Center a few hours later, so any amorous hopes Marty had did not materialize.

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Nor Kye sent word she would be ready to leave the spacer in a few moments, so Marty sat in the lounge with a cocktail, waiting for her. He waited almost an hour, his mind full of current problems, when the passage of time dawned on him and he started for B-deck to make inquiries. The stewardess had a message for him.

Nor Kye had left the ship. No explanation. Just that. Nor Kye had left the ship.

Thoroughly bewildered and just as angry, Marty went to the Spacemen's Hotel and signed in. On the way he verified all the written descriptions he'd gotten relative to the Zedans. They were certainly a sloppy lot. The "child with the crayon" description fitted them perfectly.

HE THOUGHT of getting in touch with Will Freeman, the man from the real-estate department whom he'd sent up to buy buildings and property for the undertaking venture; then remembered Freeman was already back on Terra with his report. Marty frowned. This being in love had its drawbacks. Never before had he been so absent-minded. Well, he'd get back in the saddle and get things rolling. Find out where Joshua Blunt had fallen down and get the project rolling again.

He went directly to the insane asylum and sought out the director. This was not difficult, as important executives on Zeda 3 evidently did not make themselves hard to find. A card on a desk in the lobby said: Fiff Zanzzad, Superintendent.

Zanzzad was a dark-haired, blurry little man, with an ingrown chin and a weak smile. Marty identified himself and made his business known.

"Oh, yes," Zanzzad said, "the man seems harmless, but he's pretty well gone. Would you like to see him?"

"I would," Marty replied grimly.

Marty was shown to a small room containing two chairs and a table. He sat down on one of the chairs and a few moments later an attendant came in and laid several pieces of paper and a pair of scissors on the table, after which she smiled and left. A few minutes later they brought Joshua Blunt in and left him alone with Marty.

Marty got up and put out his hand. "Josh old boy! What the hell happened?" He had already seen the look in Blunt's eyes and it had frightened him.

Josh said nothing. He acted as though he were entirely alone in the room. He walked past Marty, sat down at the table, and went to work with the scissors. In a few moments, while Marty stared in horror, Josh came up with a very creditable paper doll. He looked up and saw Marty, seemed surprised but not displeased. He held up the doll, smiled and said, "Good, huh? Wait while I make a duck."

Marty sprang from his chair. "Josh, for God's sake! You're off your trolley. Put those damn scissors down and talk to me."

Josh said, "They go quack," and went on with his work. Marty snatched his hat and fled back to the lobby.

A LARGE blond man was seated at the superindentent's desk. Marty skidded to a halt and said, "The superindendent—Mr. Zanzzad. I want to talk to him."

The blond man looked surprised. "Yes. I am Mr. Zanzzad. I spoke to you before."

"Like hell you did. A little dark

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guy. He's the one I want."

"I don't understand. I have been at this desk for over an hour. That is, except for maybe two minutes. No one sits here but me. I talked to you and sent you in to see your friend Mr. Blunt, the Terran."

"Don't give me that! What kind of a racket you guys running here?"

Mr. Zanzzad looked at Marty as though he thought him out of his mind.

Somehow that did it. Marty had not realized his own strain and tension over the preceding few weeks. He'd run on nervous energy and little more. He was set to hair's balance and this insanity tipped him forward.

"Your friend," Mr. Zanzzad said, "may not have been insane when he came here. In fact, we were about to release him this morning. But his mind snapped quite suddenly, obviously, from strain of some sort."

"I'm not talking about my friend. I'm talking about you two jokers. You and the little dark guy who was just here."

The superintendent stared helplessly. "I tell you *I* am the only—"

Marty started one from his ankles that caught the man square on the button and sent him down and skidding along the floor. "I'm about fed up with this merry-go-round," he yelled.

But he had no time to say more, because Zedan guards were converging on him from four directions. He grinned without mirth and got the first one alongside the head with a looping right. Then he began fighting in earnest.

He did very well for himself, the Zedans not being up to par as rough and tumble fighters. But the general population began flooding in and getting in the way. General bedlam broke loose and Marty was hard pressed to fight his way to the door.

He knocked down two policemen and ran into the street, only to be stopped by an approaching mob. He stopped, crouched, and swung his head like a stag at bay when a hand touched his arm and there was a familiar voice.

"Marty! Marty—this way!"

He whirled. "Nor Kye! How in blazes—"

"Never mind. Down this alley."

WITHOUT further words they ran, side by side, in the indicated direction. Then into another alley, down a street and under a bridge. The crowd had thinned out progressively until now, save for an occasional passerby, they were quite alone.

Nor Kye pulled up, bit her lip and leaned against the wall. "We'll make it all right," she said, "but I'm afraid you'll have to carry me. I've sprained an ankle."

Marty swept her up into his arms. "Where to?"

"I'm going to take you to the Sacred Place, Marty. We rent a scooter somewhere in this neighborhood. It will take about an hour to get there."

"The what? Do you mean to tell me there's anything sacred on this accursed planet?"

"It's a great tower on the Assgaad Plains. Very few people ever go there."

"How is your ankle? Bad?"

Her face was close to his and he saw the blush that spread over her face. "My ankle is all right. There was nothing wrong with it. I just wanted to be in your arms."

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"You've got an awful lot of explaining to do, but before you start I have a simple statement of fact. You're very beautiful."

"I'm glad you think so. It means a lot to me. Nobody ever said that to me before. You see—this isn't really my body."

Marty gapped, missed a step, and Nor Kye slipped from his arms. "There's a garage," she said, pulling him along by the hand.

Five minutes later they were seated in a small runabout, Nor Kye at the controls. Without giving him time for questions, she accelerated the scooter, lifted it above the tree-tops and was speeding northwest from Rhudo Center.

"Look, baby—"

NOR KYE reached across and put a finger on his lips. "Let me give you a rundown first. I'll answer some obvious questions and then you can ask any others that you think of."

"Go ahead," Marty replied glumly.

"First, I'm not a Venusian. I'm a Zedan. So I can tell you why your funeral and cemetery project failed. You see, Zedans are not humanoid in the strictest sense of the word. They are invisible, spiritual beings of a far higher plain than any visible beings. That's not quite accurate, but it will do as a starting point."

"It's silly, angel. I can see them, so they aren't invisible. And you're a Venusian so you can't be a Zedan. Better try again."

"Be quiet and listen to me. No one knows where the beginning of our evolution was. It goes back millions of years. I can only tell you the present living process of a Zedan. We'll skip their births for a moment and take as an example a newly born Zedan. He or she is an invisible entity, but with an instinct to manifest. In the home of every Zedan family there is a room where, at all times, is kept a male body and a female body. The newly-born Zedan finds one of these bodies and moves into it. Thus do they manifest."

"I'll listen, but I don't have to believe," Marty said glumly.

"But it's all true, and here is the point that vitally affects your project. Zedans do not die in the same manner as beings born visible. When death comes for them, they just fade away, so to speak. They go back to The Source. Bodies, to Zedans, are nothing more nor less than clothing, Marty. No Zedan has less than three, and some have eight or ten. They think of bodies exactly as Terrans regard a suit of clothes. There are body factories on Zedan which correspond exactly to clothing factories on Terra and many other planets. When a Zedan grows tired of a body, he sells it to a second-hand body store; when it gets shabby, he throws it away."

"Great jumping toads! That explains—"

"—why those two Zedans had Joshua Blunt arrested when he carried that body away and embalmed it. It was a perfectly good one, and in their eyes he maliciously ruined it by filling it with embalming fluid. Also, when he had the funeral ceremony, he got the same reacton as he'd have gotten on Terran by going to all that silly trouble over a pair of pants or an overcoat."

"Wait a minute. Do you mean to say Zedans go from one body to another?"

"Of course. Some of them will appear in as many as five or six in one day. You did the insane asylum director a great injustice by punching him. He was the same man. He'd just

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stepped into his private office and changed his body."

MARTY THREW back his head and laughed, but there was more hysteria than humor in the laugh. "This would be funny if it wasn't pathetic. If it hadn't cost Josh his sanity and Galactic forty million unicredits."

"That's why I advised you to go slow, Marty—"

He jerked around suddenly, his eyes on her. "That's right. There are a lot more things to be explained. You say you're a Zedan and you knew all the time. Why did you keep it a secret?"

"One thing at a time. Let me tell you about myself first. I am a Zedan, but an exceptional one, I guess, in that I admired the Solar Group and envied their being so far ahead of us in so many ways. I wanted to live in your better world, so when Zedan was taken into the Federation, I went to Venus and studied. Then, after I got my body, I went to Terra and got a job with Galactic."

"Wait a minute. Let's not leave any loose ends. Things I'll wake up wondering about. For instance, if Zedans wear different bodies every fifteen minutes, how do other Zedans know who they are?"

Nor Kye pondered for a few moments as the scooter moved over a vast treeless plain. "That's hard to explain to anyone but another Zedan, and a Zedan wouldn't need an explanation. Let me put it this way: You'd recognize a friend of yours no matter how often he changed his suit, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, but not if he wore a false face."

"Well, it's—take a flock of seals or birds that all look exactly alike. They recognize each other." Marty didn't seem convinced, and Nor Kye went on: "It's something we just *know*. Call it instinct. Maybe it's in the timbre of the voice. I don't know—except a Zedan couldn't hide his true identity under any circumstances."

"I'll take your word for it."

"I guess you'll have to."

"I can see now why I was a fool for not waiting on a final report, but I still don't get you, baby. Why did you let me barge ahead and lose my job?"

"Will you lose your job?"

"On this one—sure. I've had a couple of other bad ones, but not forty million unicredits' worth. I'm finished with Galactic."

Nor Kye bit her lip. "And you aren't mad at me?"

"I'd like to be but, damn it all, I'm in love with you, baby. I'd like to know, though, why you gave me the runaround on the trip to Zeda 3."

"It's because I love you too and—oh, Marty!"

NOR KYE had brought the scooter to a halt beside an ancient two-hundred-foot tower. But neither of them were in a mood to pay it any mind. Nor Kye stepped from the scooter. Marty followed, caught her, took her in his arms.

"No, Marty—no!"

"But why not?"

"Because I'm not of your species! This is a manufactured body I'm wearing. I could step out of it anytime and disappear from your sight! I'm a Zedan!"

"Do you want to step out of that gorgeous hunk of flesh?"

"No—no. I want to stay in it forever—die in it!"

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"Then doesn't that make you my species? So far as I can see, Terrans are nothing more than Zedans who can't get out of their bodies. How are we different?"

"But this Venusian body. It's *manufactured*. That means it has no soul."

"No soul—hell! You're in it, aren't you? You mean Zedans are soulless creatures?"

Nor Kye's eyes got large and misty, as if it were only now she seemed to realize where she was. She took Marty's hand and whispered, "Come."

They walked toward the tower and in through a worn stone portal. "Down there," Nor Kye whispered, and there was a deep reverence in her voice.

Marty stared, awe-struck, over a stone balustrade into a pool of beautiful azure fire. It seemed to be without heat, but its even, clear burning was the very essence of serene, infinite power.

"The Flame of Life," Nor Kye whispered. "It is from that fire that all Zedans are born. And when their lives have run out, they return again to merge with it."

Marty could not speak. He pressed Nor Kye's hand and remained silent for some minutes.

Then he said to her, "With men from other planets coming to Zeda 3, something will have to be done to protect this place. You will have to guard it."

Nor Kye smiled, and there was great mysticism in her eyes. "No. Only a Zedan can find it. You could have wandered on this plain for the rest of your days and never come to the tower. That's something else I can't explain, but it is true. Believe me, my dear."

"And you're trying to tell me you haven't got a soul?"

"Oh...Marty!" And for the first time she was in his arms completely and without reservation.

Quite a while later they were riding back toward Rhudo Center when Nor Kye said, "There are other things I haven't told you, darling. About why I spent all that time in night school on Terra. But, first, we've got to go back to Chicago so you can get fired."

A YEAR passed swiftly, and by that time Haines Enterprises was doing rather well. The Zedans jumped at the new line of bodies offered by this up-and-coming firm. They had seven factories and had hired every available Venusian craftsman. They opened over a thousand retail outlets on Zeda 3. Still, they were always at least nine months behind on orders.

The two executive heads spent most of their time in the sumptuous Chicago headquarters where, almost any day, could be heard a female voice of thrilling timbre yelling: "Marty! Marty Haines!"

And Marty Haines would go, on the double, into his wife's office. "Look, baby. We have a perfectly good buzzer system. Why in hell don't you use it once in a while?"

And Nor Kye would smile. "You have such a beautiful name, darling. I want to use it every single chance I get."

Then Marty always kissed his gorgeous wife, after which they'd possibly check over a new line of superspecial bodies for Zeda 3.

THE END

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The flames reached out for him with searing fingers as he painfully crawled forward

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By John Fletcher

Most dead ducks make a good dinner. This one was too tough for that....

A Star Has Fallen

GUY ARNOLD caught a glimpse of the falling star and swung the telescope of Mount Rops Observatory to follow the downward curve of its strange green flame. It wasn't the big telescope, which could not have been maneuvered fast enough to catch the streaking heavenly object, but the small one he had constructed and installed himself so that there would always be a lens he could use for his own purposes without interference. Right now, too, the big telescope was on automatic, hooked up to a series of time exposure cameras. Maybe one of the cameras would show the streak of the falling star and serve to confirm whatever visual observation he would make.

The strange green-flaming object grew in size, and Arnold worked with

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his focus desperately. He fought to bring the thing into sharp vision—for an instant seemed to succeed. Then the thing passed beyond observation. Unless his eyes had been lying to him, that thing had been regular, ovoid, man-made—no hunk of rock from the debris of a shattered planet, or other irregular debris of space.

Guy Arnold was very young to have been appointed to the staff of the famous Rops observatory. He wasn't at all the type you'd take for an astronomer. He was big, muscular, athletic. But his body aided and abetted a brilliant mind, one that had attracted attention by the phenomenal ease with which he disposed of celestial mathematics. However, because of his youth, he had no important work at the observatory, and called himself, humorously, "The Night Watchman of Mount Rops". Important assignments were supervised by older men, and beyond solving difficult mathematical problems for these older men, his duties necessitated only the turning of certain switches at certain times, and periodically checking the automatic machinery to make sure everything was functioning as designed. It always was—somewhat to his frustration.

Yet, Guy's consuming interest in life was not astronomy. Just now it was specifically Jane Seymour. He was also deeply interested in space travel, a dream he fervently hoped would materialize in his lifetime. He had selected astronomy as his major in college only because studying it was the closest he could get to learning about space firsthand, and the actual crossing of space in a spaceship.

In spite of the world peace that had finally ended a century of war preceding the successful organization of the nations of the world into one functioning state, Man had not yet conquered the void in 2051. Much of Arnold's free time in the observatory, and there was a lot of it, had been spent dreaming through his own telescope; dreaming with his eyes on the pathways between the stars, and of the time when man would travel those paths. Thus, when he had spotted the swiftly moving green object, his mind had leaped to the possibility of its being a spaceship, had caused him to triangulate rapidly, calculate its apparent objective with his expert command of celestial mathematics and geometry. Thus, also, when his shift was ended, he got out his little one-man flyer and jetted off for the Mohave Desert as if his life depended upon it.

The strange green flame of the falling star had attracted no other eye than Guy's, apparently, for no report of it had come in; and Guy was too cautious to sound off at the first indication of a discovery he was certain was going to be momentous. He had seen others ridiculed for making too impulsive guesses, and he knew that sometimes eyes see what they wish to see, rather than what is actually there. Young and impulsive as he was, he wasn't going to be caught off base proclaiming he had seen a spaceship. He had to have either the ship itself, or a very good photograph taken, before witnesses who could swear there was no trickery. So he had mentioned the certainty in his mind concerning the object's nature to no other soul.

HOURS LATER he landed his little plane triumphantly in the heat of the desert sun beside a great metal ovoid. Guy was proud of his split-second observation, and his subsequent calculations that had given him the location of the landing spot of the strange object so closely that he had been able to fly directly to it. It had been a feat of mathematics he could be proud to claim as his own.

Now that he stood beside the space-

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ship, Guy Arnold made the greatest mistake of his life. Up to now he had proceeded with extreme logic. But he was in love, and he wanted very much to have Jane Seymour witness his discovery before he called the press. He wanted her on hand to share his triumph. He wanted her to be the very first, after himself, to see the alien ship; to be the first woman to greet the voyagers from out of space when they at last stepped out of the still-smoking hull. And it was obvious that it would be many hours before it cooled enough for anyone to go near it, or enough for anything living inside to venture out.

Guy Arnold got back into his plane and flew off to lay his newfound treasure at the feet of his mate-to-be. Or more literally, to bring her to witness his triumph.

Jane Seymour—the name itself was heavenly music to him—was one of those genuine blondes about whose blondeness there is never any doubt, for her skin was like milky velvet. Her great blue eyes overlooked a luscious, inviting mouth that Guy could testify was every bit as devastating in actuality as it appeared. Arnold loved her, and would never have listened if some friend had tried to tell him that those blue eyes were a bit too calculatingly selfish, or that those lips could form into lines of both cruelty and deceit. However, it was a fact that few men could have discerned in her anything but the most lovable of feminine creatures.

Arnold landed in a pasture near her home, rushed off to her front door hatless and disheveled, the picture of science triumphant, just out of the grime of discovery. Because of the mental picture he had built of rushing in to her and clasping her in his arms and kissing her red lips as he announced his great discovery, he was vastly taken aback to find her entertaining another man; and, worse, a man clad in the sleek black and gold of the United Nations' Security Police.

Jane's lovely face turned from an intent regard of the ruddy countenance of this intrepid young officer in his dashing uniform to examine the tall, excited figure of Guy Arnold with distinctly critical eyes. He was hatless, his pantlegs were infested with cockle-burrs and sand-burrs, his tie was hanging at half-mast, and his shirt-tail was in alarming evidence beneath a coat he had apparently slept on.

INSTEAD of immediately announcing his world-shaking discovery, Guy stood with his mouth open, catching his wind and trying to evaluate the importance of this burly young man in the future of Jane Seymour. Too, he was bemused as always with the sudden impact of the sight of Jane's subtle sinuosities. Even more revealing than usual, her dress today was one of the new, extremely low-cut affairs that looked to Guy as if it had been put on backward expressly to reveal her distracting bosom.

She stretched out a hand to him, laughing a little at his appearance, and asking: "Whatever has happened to you, dearest? Come, you must meet my illustrious friend, Major Brant. His father is Commander Brant, you must know, of the Security Police."

She led a reluctant Guy to the vicinity of the somewhat terrifying presence of the sleek young officer. burly uniformed men wearing heavy Guy was not accustomed to facing from a distance—the greater the distance the better. Guy shook hands feebly.

"My fiance," Jane chattered. "His scientific enthusiasm often leads to such entrances as he has just made."

Guy's confused gaze came to rest

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on the round World emblem on the officer's breast, and his mind jogged him to the duty he was neglecting. This find must be reported as quickly as possible to exactly such authority as this officer could contact for him. Otherwise some single nation might get hold of it (even his own nation) and keep the secret of space travel for themselves. Mankind must not find itself shut off from space except for a favored few. It must belong to everyone.

The officer, wanting to impress Arnold, was saying: "Yes, my dad is the commander of the Security Police. Officially he can't give me much of a post, so I do the leg work for him as his aide. I like to think sometimes I'm running the greatest military power in the world, when I sit at his desk when he's off duty. Quite a thought, the possibility of all that power, the whole world—" The burly young man suddenly broke off as Guy's eyes grew wide in a kind of awe. He wondered if he hadn't said too much? It wouldn't do to have people think that the Brants *really* wanted to run the world.

Arnold sighed with sudden relief. His problem was solved. Here were the shoulders equipped to bear the burden of a secret that must be international in scope. He stuttered a little as he got going: "This is the day, Jane, and Lieutenant—I mean Major—this is the day that Man contacts space! I have seen a spaceship land, out in the Mohave sands—"

"Whatever are you trying to say?" asked Jane, sniffing his breath suspiciously.

"This is the greatest day in Man's history!" repeated Guy, letting his voice rise in volume until he sounded like a pulpit in full swing. "This is the day Guy Arnold's name goes down in history as the first man to sight a visitor from space! Come, there's no time to waste—we must be out there when they open the ship and step out upon Earth for the first time. I can't imagine what they will be like, what they can give us of their vast experience—it's too much to think about! But they must be highly civilized, to be able to build the ship that landed out there!"

Jane looked at the young officer in the black uniform. He hitched at his holster belt uncomfortably. It would be damned embarrassing if he had to take this fool to the psycho. Hardly the job for him to be seen doing. It might get in the papers.

Then, both Jane and the young Major began to laugh together, which fact gave rise to fury in Arnold's breast. He shouted even louder, in a voice that was growing wild: "Don't laugh! I flew out to make sure. I *know* what I'm talking about, not guessing! It's down in the Mohave, whether by accident or design I don't know. But it's there, big as life. I'd enjoy taking you both there, and since it's got to be reported to the authorities, who better to report it to than your father, Commander Brant of the United Nations' Police Force?"

Brant took his eyes from the nonexistent front of Jane Seymour's gown for the second time since he'd arrived. Guy decided the bulging of his eyes was natural, then, and not a result of the dress—for they still bulged. He gave Guy a quick, complete going-over with them, then returned them to Jane's frontal prominences abruptly and there they remained.

"Just what does your boy-friend do, Jane?" asked the officer, ignoring Guy.

"He's an astronomer at Mount Rops. If he says it's there, it's most probably there. I never knew him to go off his rocker before. You'd better get on your horse."

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STUNG WITH a sudden realization that dawned over his face like opportunity knocking with a sledge-hammer, Brant whirled around. "Where's your plane, Mr. Arnold? This is distinctly a matter that must remain under the close scrutiny of the upper echelon of the Security Forces until it can be safely released. We'll fly out there just as soon as I call my father!"

Jane suddenly went into a flutter. "I'm not dressed for a flying trip! Can you wait while I change?"

Guy was getting a bit weary of his plan to lay the treasure out of space at her feet, which had somehow become entangled with the polished black boots of Officer Brant. He distinctly did not relish taking *both* to the scene of his greatest triumph. Somehow, he knew the glory of it would rub off very easily onto the young Major.

"Oh, throw on a coat, for Heaven's sake," growled Guy. "You look heavenly, if a little exposed in parts, and a coat will fix that. Come on..."

Major Brant's eyes lifted from their study of Jane's frontal curves. "You look wonderful, Miss Seymour," he murmured as he made his way to the phone.

Jane blushed and Guy scowled. As the Major finished his phone call, he turned and strode out ahead of them, then turned as a thought struck him and he saw the Major fitting a trench coat around her shoulders and realized he was putting his own coat on Guy's girl.

"Damn!" muttered Guy.

FORTY MINUTES later Guy landed his plane beside the strange ovoid in the Mohave, and almost simultaneously the long, deadly fighters of the Security Police came swooping in like bullets in long curves as they swept closer and thundered in to land in a glittering circle of fire-power around the alien shape of pitted, still slightly smoking metal. Guardians of the peace of the world they were, but somehow to Guy they looked like deadly wasps in their shining black and gold paint, just as venomous and just as wrong. An hour later he knew how wrong as they led him away under guard.

The next few days became etched on Guy Arnold's memory with particularly bitter acid. The acid took the form of symbols in his memory. Symbols of exaltation as he had met the fierce-eyed, winged strangers from space face to face that first day. Symbols of frustration and suspicion as he had found himself detained in Security Police headquarters.

As the days dragged by and he found no mention in the press of himself, or his discovery of the alien ship's descent on the Mohave, of the ship itself and its astounding crew from beyond our Solar System, he pondered why everything connected with the affair was so sternly kept from public knowledge. He himself was allowed to communicate with no one, which was distinctly illegal, and could be excused on no grounds of "security" that he could figure out. He spent the days bitterly cursing the ill fate that had brought Andrew Brant, Jr., to Jane Seymour's home on that particular day. He was sure that his ill luck stemmed from that meeting.

The cell blocks of the Security Police prison became the terrible symbol of his mistake, in not making sure his news was printed in the newspapers by the press of the world before the military got hold of it. For Guy Arnold realized now that the worst had happened: the world was in the grip of a military clique which had absolute rule of all its nations! And this being so, what would it mean to the people of those nations when the secrets of the ship from space became the prop-

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erty of that military clique?

ANTHEA EPP was the only daughter of the world-famous brain surgeon, Ephraim Epp. Her heart belonged first of all to her father, and second to her chosen work, following in the footsteps of her father. Anthea was one of those too-attractive girls who find it necessary to disguise their natural perfections in order to follow the way of life they choose. After long experience with unwelcome male pursuit, Anthea had taken to rough tweeds, heavy oxfords and thick glasses with enthusiasm. In consequence, few but her intimates knew that Anthea Epp was really a ravishing beauty.

She was a studious girl determined to follow in her illustrious father's footsteps. What time she was not engaged in study for her Doctor's degree, she spent worrying about her overworked father's health. That was why the phone call summoning her to the office of Commander Brant of the Security Police brought her there with such alacrity. She feared something had happened to him, for the Commander had insisted that the welfare of her father depended upon her presence.

Anthea never did understand why they detained her for a day and a night. She never got over it, either, for she never again saw her father. Nor could she learn from any source what had become of him. She swore that when she did learn what the mystery was about, she was going to have somebody's scalp....

EPHRAIM EPP was summoned to the offices of the Commander of the Security Police peremptorily, and in spite of the fact that he had retired from active practice, he knew that he had to go.

Ephraim Epp was the most famous brain surgeon in the world. Also, he was one of the greatest dissenters with things as they now were. He had never approved of the United Nations' appointment of Andrew Brant to the position of the greatest individual power in the modern world. On this day of June 10, 2051, there was no longer any reason to give any man the secret dictatorial powers possessed still by the head of Security Police.

Once, a century ago, in the days when any fanatic group of men could wreck the world with atom bombs, yes. But not today, when the whole problem of atom bomb production had been brought under control. Men like Andrew Brant needed to be watched, Ephraim considered, rather than to be handed the control of the greatest military power extant. And Ephraim knew how that power was capable of being used, so he went when he was summoned.

He drove his long, thin legs reluctantly to carry him with seeming jauntiness up the steps of the gloomy headquarters. Built in the days of actual A-bomb fear, it was a squat, ugly pile of concrete, preposterously ponderous, with walls of concrete fifty feet thick and curved roofs almost as thick. God alone knew what warrens of indestructible masonry underlay the terrific superstructure.

Yes, Andrew Brant was well protected. If any man alive could reach him with intent to harm, it would have to be with the consent of his black-and-gold guard.

Ephraim wearily endured six consecutive identification ceremonies before a prominent-bosomed young lady who smoothed her black-and-gold skirt over her sleek thighs as she smiled upon him and finally said: "The Commander is waiting for you, Doctor Epp."

Some deep inner intuition made the Doctor glance more sharply at the

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sleek, blonde young woman. A warning bell rang for Ephraim then. A Doctor can tell a lot from a dilated pupil, from a line of white eyeball, from the seemingly perfectly controlled tones of a patient's voice. Especially a man as brilliant as Doctor Epp, with forty years of specialized observation behind him. He knew this young woman had just been very badly frightened.

"Aren't you well, girl?" asked Doctor Epp kindly, absently reaching to take her pulse.

She managed a rather good imitation of a carefree laugh and gently twisted her wrist from his professional grasp. "If you had my job," she whispered somewhat shakily in his ear, "you'd look nervous, too! No, dear Doctor, I always wear my eyeballs protruding. Go right in, and happy landings."

With which *sotto voce* parting the Doctor found himself gently but firmly pushed into an open door by the blonde. But he was rather certain he heard her mutter: "And God help you, Grandpa," but he dismissed it as a trick of his over-suspicious ears.

The man who sat at the big desk flanked by a battery of particularly complex dictaphones, recorders, card-files and other gadgetry, was flanked on the other side by a singularly large, red-faced orderly who resembled nothing so much as a slightly flustered wrestler. Ephraim could guess what kept him wearing that perpetually worried expression. Andrew Brant, most powerful single individual in the world, was exactly the type of man Ephraim had feared to find. A doctor knows human nature as no other man, after a lifetime of listening to patients' woes, and Ephraim put him down as a supreme egotist. The surgeon didn't have to open his skull to know what ailed his brain. He had a narrow, curved beak of a nose, a large, florid face, large bulging eyes, and a partly bald dome that Ephraim felt covered one of the shrewdest and least inhibited minds he had ever faced. Ephraim knew he wouldn't like this man.

BRANT'S voice was heavy, a masculine rasp, and his effort to be cordial was too obviously an effort. "Good afternoon, Doctor Epp. You were recommended to me by a round dozen of your colleagues. They told me you were the only man alive capable of performing the series of operations that must be performed."

Ephraim sat down on the vacant chair before the desk, though he had received no invitation to do so. He placed his brown Homburg on the polished desk top, knowing that the act irritated the man. Ephraim wagged one forefinger deprecatingly, finding himself astonished as ever that his own hands could be so bony. Ephraim gave a somewhat scornful laugh, said: "My esteemed colleagues are often noted for their willingness to shove an unpleasant job off on someone else. It is a human quality to which I attribute my success. However, this time they won't get away with it. I have retired from active practice. I am no longer so sure I have the only pair of capable hands in the surgical profession."

The burly, balding chief chuckled, and lit a long, thin cigar. He did not offer one to Ephraim, and the Doctor deduced that the police officer had made a thorough study of the file dossary on the man he had summoned to know that he did not smoke.

Ephraim continued: "Brain operations are frequently avoided even by expert and extremely capable brain surgeons, on one pretext or another. They don't like to take risks."

The big man smiled around his cigar, took it out of his thin-lipped mouth. His eyes had not relaxed, but

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were intent on Ephraim, measuring him, and the Doctor felt a tremor of apprehension.

"The job ahead, Doctor, is unavoidable. It must be done by the best man obtainable. And that man is you. You will not be allowed to back out. You see, Doctor," the burly form leaned forward, and his face took on a purposeful look of extreme secrecy, of vast importance, trying to impress the Doctor with the urgency of the need, "the safety of our civilization absolutely depends upon your consent!"

Ephraim, startled by what he considered inexcusable misrepresentation, ejaculated one loud word: "Hogwash!"

THE COMMANDER leaned back at Ephraim's explosion, and the smile left his eyes. He put the cigar back into his mouth and twisted his head in a gesture Ephraim compared with that of a shrewd cattle dealer he had once treated for cancer. The man had used just that gesture as he tried to decide whether Ephraim was telling him the truth, or trying to hold him up for a fat fee.

Ephraim said no more. He waited. For seconds the two men looked at each other like a couple of chess players, each trying to read the other's mind. Then the Commander began to talk quietly, with a slow emphasis on each word.

"Doctor, the thing long expected by the best scientific minds has at last come to pass. The world is no longer an isolated island of life in a universe of apparent emptiness. We have visitors. Visitors from space!"

Ephraim shook his head, as if to clear his eardrums of water. The Commander went on: "Last night a space ship fell in the Mohave Desert."

His little eyes watched Ephraim with an oddly sinister expression. The Doctor knew, suddenly, that this was going to be the worst ordeal of a life filled with tense, nervous experiences. He stood up, picked up his hat, put it on his head.

"Even if you are quite serious, I don't believe you. And even if I believe you, I do not want any part of the fantastic performance you are obviously suggesting."

The Commander held up one beefy and quite commanding palm. "Sit down, Doctor. This is no jest, and I am not trying to see if your head is operating properly. We surrounded an alien ship out in the desert, with fighting aircraft. We took the alien beings out of their damaged spaceship and made them prisoner. That was some hours ago. We know something about them now. They are not human!"

Ephraim did not remove his hat. "What's that got to do with me? Why should I be called, even if you have a shipload of other-world freaks on hand?" But as he spoke, he had already fathomed the reason for his presence, and he shuddered inwardly at the prospect of the horror that was to be asked of him. And he knew *why* it was being asked of him, and the thought sent tremors of anger through him at the fate that had overtaken the free world. Brant's next words confirmed his suspicion in the most positive way.

BRANT SMILED, a nasty, frosty, pitying smile. Ephraim was suddenly embarrassed, and annoyed. The man considered him an impractical, undiscerning, illogical old fool. Brant's words were sharply defined, clear and hard as diamonds, perfectly plain.

"That ship contains *power*, Doctor! Weapons, a technological development ages older than our own few hundred years of stumbling progress. A people who have traveled the trackless wilderness of space for an age, since before men learned to roll up a barrier of rocks before the dinosaurs. We can't

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let them go away! They could, and most probably would, return with a force able to destroy civilization, unless we obeyed their every command. Our only possible defense is to study their ship, their method of driving that ship through space, their weirdly effective weapons, and learn everything, *absolutely everything*, that they can teach us. We must be able to defend ourselves against them if any more of them show up. Unfortunately, Doctor, they refuse to cooperate with our efforts to learn their language, their writing, their other-world science. That's why you were sent for."

Ephraim took a long step toward the door, stood with his hand on the knob. "Naturally they refuse! What else would you expect?" asked Ephraim. He waggled one forefinger, the one before which nurses quailed and lesser medical men blanched. "And I'd like to inform you, Mr. Commander of the so-called Security Police, that I *also* refuse cooperation in the suggested mutilation of defenseless and innocent visitors. No!"

With the last explosive word, Ephraim tugged his hat down on his massive brow with one hand and tugged at the door with the other. The door did not open. He turned and looked at the man behind the desk, raising one bushy eyebrow in question.

Andrew Brant put his cigar back between his thin, purple lips. "It won't open, Doctor, until I'm ready to let you go. For some people it never opens. I want to play a little recording I have here, before you leave. I'm certain you will find it of extreme interest."

Ephraim turned and placed his lean back to the door, crossed his long, bony arms and waited with his lips compressed into one stubborn line. Of all the rotten demands to make on a surgeon, this was rottenest.

A switch clicked loudly in the silent room, and the heavy breathing of the still unmoving orderly distinctly annoyed Ephraim. He glanced at the man, saw a tiny gleam of cruel expectancy in the man's hard eyes.

A voice came from the play-back of the recorder. A female voice very familiar to Doctor Aphraim Epp. It was his daughter's voice: "Please, Commander Brant, won't you tell me why you sent for me? I have an appointment at three-thirty, and I've been held since nine this morning."

COMMANDER BRANT'S voice from the record was oily, suave, utterly insincere. "We're holding you for your own safety, Miss Epp. Believe me, this is unavoidable. You may be detained for weeks."

Ephraim sat down again, put his hat on the desk. The voice of his daughter, Anthea, had unnerved him. She was his only child. For Anthea the Doctor would cheerfully have removed the brains of a hundred alien creatures. His eyes said as much to the man behind the desk, and he shut off the record. Ephraim's voice was quiet, but filled with venomous indignation, and fear.

"Now I understand you, Commander. Release the girl. I will operate. After I have made certain adjustments in the prefrontal areas, similar to the ordinary lobotomy, but somewhat more difficult, your captives will be amenable to any suggestion you give them. Their memories will be slightly impaired, as a perfect memory would also remember not to cooperate. By suitable suggestion, you should be able to get from them perfectly satisfactory explanations of their other-world apparatus. I know what you want, and I will deliver the goods. But first, release my daughter."

Ephraim waited, and the Commander, after a second of silent scrutiny of Ephraim's face to make sure he had

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heard aright, picked up the phone and ordered: "Release the prisoner in seven at once."

Commander Brant rubbed his hands together. "I'm sure we'll get along, Doctor," he exulted.

Ephraim's voice became again the voice of the selfless and benign savior of human life, the voice which had brought him millions from sick plutocrats in the past. He placed his long, bony fingers upon the desk like two great white spiders about to jump on the beefy individual on the other side. "And now, *Dictator,*" said Ephraim, "if you allow me to meet your strange prisoners, I must make certain preliminary studies. These patients must above all else remain alive, and their cranial structures will be very different from the human head, as well as their brains. I must familiarize myself with both. If you will be so kind . . ."

The Police Chief smiled, then, and the iron seemed to melt within his mask of flesh, melt into a semblance of genuine joviality. "They are not men, after all, Doctor. They are a birdlike thing. You will find your task no more unnatural than the beheading of a few chickens, I am sure. But why do you call me Dictator?"

The Doctor made a bitter sound of sudden self-revilement. "You will be, Mr. Brant! The greatest dictator of them all! Do you take me for an utter fool? If I get you the aliens' weapons, what's to stop you?"

Brant smiled. "Nothing," he said. "Nothing!"

EPHRAIM found the alien captives in the psycho ward of the hospital wing of the vast underground structure. They were trapped in bed like violent patients, and each wrist was shackled with heavy leather. Their heads were bird-like, with great orange beaks where noses should have been. A crest of bristling white feathers rose above fierce red-rimmed eyes that watched the Doctor's movements with all the malice of a hawk about to strike.

Ephraim felt shivers of apprehension as he had the portable X ray wheeled in and ordered shots of their craniums from every possible angle. He dared not make the usual injections of fluorescing chemicals into the spinal fluid, as the possible toxicity of terrestrial compounds on their other-world metabolism would be too unknown a danger to risk.

Ephraim therefore took a number of measurements of their weird peaked skulls, to which they submitted without protesting movements. Silently the Doctor wished there were some way to communicate with them, for if anyone was in full awareness of the fiendishness of what he was about to do to these things, it was Ephraim Epp.

He took the pulse, the blood pressure, the blood count, and an hour passed as he sat at a table in the same room pencilling notations of individual variations upon a chart for each, which he pinned to the bed of each captive. The pencil in his hand, the Doctor sat pondering just how to give them an anaesthetic when there was no way of knowing the effect of the usual anaesthetics upon their systems. It would be too barbarous to open their skulls without putting them to sleep. There was nothing he could think of that might not prove disastrous. They might, for instance, prove as susceptible to gas as a canary. Again, it might not even cause unconsciousness.

With a disinct sense of relief, the Doctor noted that he was alone with the captives. He had heard a racket down the hall (which happened to be caused by young Guy Arnold trying to commit mayhem on three oversized orderlies as they tried to remove

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his clothes and hand him a nightie), and the watchful military guards posted at the hospital ward door had rushed off to render aid to what sounded like murder.

Finding himself thus miraculously alone with the visitors from space, Ephraim was struck with a sudden impulse. He strode to the bed of the very largest and most fierce in appearance of the rooster-topped creatures, tugged loose the wristlet from one of the weird scaled claws, shoved the pencil between the scaly digits. Then he released the other claw-like hand, placed the writing pad in it. If there was a way of communication without words, it was possible such space travelers would know it. The problem was insurmountable to Ephraim himself.

Silently the Doctor waited, his eyes on the red-rimmed orbs of the prone being. After a long second, the creature began to draw a tiny picture. It was a human face. The expression on the face was open-mouthed, utter bewilderment expressed far more quickly than any words. Ephraim took the pad and quickly drew a rough sketch of himself making a hole in the rooster-crested skull of one of the aliens. Then he drew another of the creatures with its head cut open. The red-rimmed eyes watched, and from their expression Ephraim could deduce only that the creature would relish murdering him. So Ephraim drew a series of pictures, and they served to convey the thing that was to be done to get from them the secrets of their ship and their weapons.

Approaching footsteps cut short their little exchange of information. Ephraim seized the pad and darted back to the desk. But no one came in. The guards remained outside the closed door.

An hour later, Ephraim and Miroos of the Valkir race understood each other much better. And Doctor Epp had acquired a tiny bit of parchment that the "patient" had tugged from the tangle of feathers on his head. It had been rolled into a quill and the quill inserted in one of the feather sockets in the creature's skin.

The Doctor had managed to convey his hatred of the forces which had trapped him into committing the mutilation he planned. If Ephraim understood correctly, the captive Valkir had given him a map which would lead him to a powerful weapon which could destroy those same forces. Ephraim prayed he had not misunderstood.

The next morning Doctor Epp operated. One patient did not survive, the largest and fiercest-appearing of the ten. For Ephraim had understood him to mean that within his mind, and his mind alone, dwelt detailed keys to powers no would-be dictator should possess. Ephraim made quite sure that this particular mind did not fall slave to Andrew Brant....

TWO YEARS later, Guy Arnold's dream of space flight came true at last. Hustled from his solitary cell in the old Security Police barracks, lined up with a score of others, loaded aboard at midnight without a single reporter there to note his going, Arnold completely understood the devious character of the over-ambitious Brants.

The years had given the once gullible astronomer a thorough education in "police methods", and in the evil faces behind the phrase young Brant had used: "...the upper echelon of Security Forces". Arnold would have given a thorough-going university lecture on the philosophy of rule by force, as exemplified by the elder Brant's rapid progress to supreme power over world affairs. Arnold had been able to follow some of the moves from the distinctly bland and mean-

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ingless phrases of the news from papers he occasionally managed to beg from his guards. One item that had infuriated him heralded the establishment of a prison upon a desolate planet they had named Harkor, designed to remove forever from Earth the taint of criminal blood. Arnold quite understood the real purpose the prison was designed to accomplish.

Guy Arnold knew now his dream for the future of Mankind, the freedom of expansion that space flight would make possible, was forever vitiated—unless some unseen catastrophe overtook the tremendous organization Brant was building.

Through his tiny porthole he watched the stars now with a bitter eye, mentally computing the probable course and distance of the ship from Earth. Simultaneously he pondered the ugly fact that space flight had been obtained by Mankind only by stealing the knowledge from the very ship whose arrival he had innocently reported to the wrong place.

He understood why he had been held without legal excuse. Also, he knew from the occasional newspapers that the head of the Security Police had become World Dictator, with the weapons of the beings captured in the ship. It was bitterest of all for him to realize that he himself had been instrumental in destroying all Man's progress toward self-government, toward real freedom. He knew that this first voyage of his into space would be his last, that he would never return.

From the porthole Guy Arnold turned to the frail old prisoner beside him.

"There she is, Doc. Harkor, framed in the glorious black of space, lit by its own hell-fires, heated by its own lava rivers, stinking with its own gases. She sure is an ugly sight. Just the place for a winter vacation!"

The prisoner rolled a jaundiced eye toward Arnold, hacked out a kind of laugh that was really a cough. "Not interested, young fellow. I'm slated to die there; it will be good enough for that."

But the old man heaved himself to a sitting position from the acceleration hammock, and Guy leaned back so he could peer out. The surgeon gave it one glance, then leaned back with a weary sigh. "Just the kind of a hole Brant would pick for his friends; Arnold. One thing I learned from Brant: never do what a bad man wants, because you'll be sorry. What did you learn?"

Arnold laughed, a bitter laugh that had in it still an intense living hope for revenge. "I learned never to believe anything you are told too often. I was the damn fool who reported the ship's arrival."

THE OLD surgeon sat up then, his eyes examining Arnold with sudden new interest. "You're the fool who told him how to get hold of that club! Well, I'll be dammed! Why didn't you call the papers? Didn't you know that the Military always suppresses everything the people ought to be told until it's too late to be of any use to them?"

"I didn't quite realize how automatic the machinery of dictatorship had become, or how it really works. I saw the ship land, and my only thought was that no one nation should get it before any other. The Security Police was the only alternative to Washington. I never thought of the papers, but wouldn't it have been the same thing?"

"If the big brass hear of anything like that first, they always keep it a secret. If the papers give it out before they get it, they pretend they wanted them to. Publicity would have protected those poor winged Valkirs."

"Valkirs? Is that what they were

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called?"

The old surgeon glanced about to make sure no one could hear their conversation. Then he leaned toward Arnold, whispered: "I learned a great deal about those poor captives before I operated. They made me turn the Valkirs into a kind of zombie, a willing mind of information."

Arnold shrank back from the old doctor. "You didn't! A man of your character couldn't have done a thing like that!"

The doctor smiled bitterly. "They had my daughter. They would have, at the very least, kept her imprisoned for the rest of her life—just as they have us. I won her release—by doing the ghastliest crime of which a doctor is capable. I removed the will, left only the mechanism of memory."

Arnold fell into a deep, musing silence, his eyes on the doctor's brooding face. After a long minute, he asked, "Couldn't you fake the operation, just perform a simple trepanning, leave the brain intact?"

The doctor spoke absently in answer: "There were a dozen of the most able brain surgeons dancing attendance as I operated. Willing stooges to Brant, they would have given me away at once. However, I did manage to perform the operation in such a way that the brain will heal. By this time the Valkirs are themselves again, and should realize enough of the perfidy behind their captor's acts to keep silent about their recovery. I often wonder if they will find a chance to turn the tables. . . ."

"I hope so! That's about the only chance of our ever seeing freedom again."

"There is one other chance," whispered the doctor, again glancing around secretively. "I know of a method of escape from Harkor! But it is a method only one man can use. That man must be myself, for the Valkirs managed to give me a secret of theirs—a secret that my operation obliterated from the one mind containing it—by killing him."

Arnold leaned closer. "How could they give you a secret when you couldn't even speak their language, or they ours?"

THE OLD man laboriously tugged a little packet of personal papers out of an inner pocket in his gray prison suit. Every prisoner carried such treasures, addresses of friends on the outside, pictures of loved ones, old newspaper clippings, letters from the few who knew where they were imprisoned. But neither the doctor nor Arnold had any such letters, for no one had been allowed to know what had become of them.

From the packet the Doctor slipped out a little leather-like bit of parchment, and in his cupped hands held it before Arnold's eyes, watching the aisle between the acceleration hammocks warily for the black-uniformed guards.

What Arnold saw was a tiny star map, pricked out in fine gold, with minute lettering in an hieroglyphic system of writing.

"What is it?" asked Arnold, as the old man again hid the bit of parchment in his skinny chest.

"It's a star map showing a cache, Valkir weapons, things they considered too dangerous to carry into unknown areas of space. Things they do not want any enemy of their race ever to get hold of. With this weapon a few men could wipe out the Dictator's forces overnight!"

"Are you sure Brant hasn't got this information out of them?"

The tired old skeletal face smiled wearily, shook slowly in negation. "Only one Valkir knew how to reach the cache. He was their navigator as well as their chief officer. He told me

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to memorize it, then destroy it so that it would not fall into the hands of the wrong man. He also ordered me to make sure he died under my knife. You see, I was forced to spend some time in study of their brain structure. During that time we managed to convey to each other quite a bit of information. I was able to tell them why they were being held, what I was to do to them. They were able to tell me to conceal that map, and to destroy the mind of the man who knew what the map contained. I destroyed the man, kept the map for myself. No one knew what it was, or that I had it. It was fairly safe, and I knew it might, in time, be used to overturn the rotten empire Brant would build up with the Valkir weapons. I didn't realize that I would never again see freedom. When I realized that, I didn't destroy the map and leave my old memory the only record of it. I have hung onto the thing...."

The boots of a guard rang on the metal walk between the hammocks, and the doctor fell silent, closed his eyes. Arnold watched the guard as he passed, bending to inspect each prisoner's irons. They were released from the irons only once a day, for exercise. It was still twelve hours until their short period of physical freedom.

Arnold's mind was racing. His brief glimpse of the star map had told him much, knowing the skies as he did, but he wanted with a deep hunger to study the thing at length. It was a bit of potent knowledge, that drawing of the stars by a hand that had traveled space, a hand descended from a race that had traveled space for an age. With a desperate effort he put away the thought that he might steal it from the frail old prisoner beside him and own it for himself.

But the thought remained, bolstered by all kinds of justifying syllogisms—that he might thus become the savior of Mankind, might revenge himself upon the man who had stolen his whole life from him.

With a bitter smile Arnold saw his thought for what it was, a crime, and its attendant rationalizations. Arnold had seen enough of the criminal mind to know that they all dwelt upon their rationalizations until any crime seemed justifiable. He wanted no part of any crime. He would wait, cultivate the friendship of the surgeon-prisoner, and hope that he might find a way of helping him to escape, perhaps. Anything might happen upon the ugly planet of flame-lit wilderness upon which they were even now preparing to land.

GUY ARNOLD didn't like Harkor. He was not alone in his dislike. The—guards—themselves—hated the place, cursed the feeble-minded impulse that had led them to accept a job there.

Exercise period, in the "outdoor" prison yard, was a cruel joke. The air smelled of sulphur. Other gases, of more disagreeable nature, drifted in gusts from the distant open fires of Harkor's numerous volcanoes. The guards donned respirators whenever they were forced to accompany the prisoners on their daily jaunt outside. Many of the prisoners, after a few such exercise periods, utterly refused to leave their cells, even though beaten insensible. They preferred the beating to the vile experience of parading through the stinking atmosphere.

But the husky guards usually managed to get a majority of the condemned men lined up and driven out into the suffocating fumes of the exercise yard. Some welcomed the hour, for two good reasons. They got a chance to talk to the other prisoners—and they knew also that the acid-

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bearing outside air shortened their lives by eating at their lungs. For few of that weary crew wanted more of life than they had already had. They welcomed the stinking air, breathed deeply, hoped that the rumor that the air would eat out a man's lungs in a short time was true. They smiled inwardly as they felt they were outwitting their cruel captors, and hoped fiercely the guards' ignorance of the air's effects would cause their deaths too.

The guards on Harkor, most of whom had been given duty there as a punishment assignment for various minor offenses, were a loutish, brutish lot. They took to carrying whips and using them freely on any prisoner who did not perpetually prostrate himself before them, figuratively. The guard uniform was light gray with gold braid, and the heavy, soot-laden air soon turned the braid dark, gave them a grimy, slovenly appearance no laundry could remove.

The prison, still in process of building, was immense. It was evident to all who knew the Brants that they planned Harkor to have a capacity equal to holding each and every human who could possibly prove an obstacle to their power. There were countless winding corridors and, deep in the black rock of the volcanic planet, endless warrens of subterranean dungeons. Once in one of the windowless dungeons, in solitary for some infraction of prison regulations, a man could give up all hope of seeing light again, except the brief glimpse of the lamps as food was brought twice daily. It was a place obviously planned for the disappearance of dangerous persons. Once in Harkor, there was no possible escape except upon the space ship which brought supplies and more prisoners on a monthly schedule.

GUY ARNOLD had now a full cup of venom, an accumulated hatred for the family Brant, and for the son in particular—a desire to revenge himself so deep rooted, so all-consuming that his mind had little room for anything else. His original indignation had crystallized, through the endless days and longer nights, into a fiery burning core inside him which gave him no rest from feverish planning for escape and revenge. Interminably his wits worked at the problem, and Arnold had one of the highest IQ's ever to be taken in the Arizona University where he had majored in astronomy. But the problem was insurmountable. No slightest opening presented itself, for outside was only the fiery, lava-rivered, forbidding surface of Harkor, and no way off the planet except on the prison ship itself.

Consequently, he turned his mind again and again to the old surgeon's few words of whispered confidence, to the star map he had shown him which might very possibly contain the secret of Brant's destruction, of the defeat of all his forces—and to the utter futility of possessing such a secret on Harkor where it could never do the people of Earth any good.

One day, after a long period when he had no contact with the old man, Guy was shambling on his weary round of the exercise yard when he discovered the white-faced, skeletal form of Ephraim Epp also going his painful round. Guy started to shamble in his direction, but a guard cracked a whip over his shoulders, snarled at him to get back in line.

The bitter round went on and on, and Guy was suddenly torn with pity and utter despair as he saw the old man stumble and fall. As he tried weakly to get to his feet again, a guard strode forward. His whip

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licked out, cracked across the doctor's back, and the weighted tip of the whip split open the old man's cheek. Blood welled out, and the old man gave a thin scream of pain.

Rage, held in leash so long, burst suddenly within Guy Arnold's breast like one of Harkor's volcanoes going berserk. He leaped across the intervening space, the black grass crisping under his feet. He seized the whip from the startled guard's hand, twisted it loose with one savage snarl of utter defiance, and reversed it, cracking the weighted butt into the man's face. He fell like a steer under the hammer, blood gushing from his mouth.

The guard closest to this scene of rebellion bounded up to Arnold with a shout for help from the others, two loitering at the entry door, three others spaced along the line of prisoners. Guy ducked the lash of his whip, seized him by the lapels, and with a brain seemingly bathed in fire, spit into his face, shoved a foot behind his calves and thrust him back so that he fell heavily to the ground. Furiously Arnold began to ply his whip, shouting: "Try your own medicine, you beast of bedlam, you blank-minded slave of a nit-wit boss. Try this... and this..." And as the guard rolled and scrambled on his hands and knees to get away from the flaying lash, Guy let him have it until the tunic was split and bloody over his whole back.

But his triumph was short-lived. A brutal blow from behind with the heavy butt of a whip brought him to his knees, and the kicks and blows and the whips of six guards soon stretched him senseless on the black, bloody grass. They belabored his prone body until they were tired from striking it.

WHEN AT last he came back to consciousness, it was to a Hell of pain. His eyes were too swollen to open, at first. He groaned again and again, weakly, as he tried to move first one limb, then another, with only slight success. He was one aching bruise from head to foot, and he was sure there must be internal injuries, for blood kept welling up in his throat and choking him.

At last a little strength came back to him and he struggled to a half-sitting position. He was vaguely surprised to find he was not alone in the damp, dim cell. Lying in a huddled heap like discarded clothing was another figure. Arnold guessed who it must be, but wondered why they had been placed in the same cell.

Long moments later Guy found himself supporting the old doctor's bleeding head in his arms, muttering incoherent words of rage and horror at what had been done to them. The old man opened his eyes at last, peering up into his face, and with what Arnold recognized as the height of grim courage, finding the strength for a smile, a strange bitter smile that had yet worlds of value to Guy.

Quite suddenly, as if struck with some overpowering thought, the old man sat half upright, his hands clutching Guy's arms in what he took to be a spasm of pain. But the old doctor was speaking in a quiet, urgent tone.

"Listen closely, Guy Arnold. Everything depends on your understanding now. We haven't much time. They will come again and finish the job they started, and tomorrow will find us both corpses on the dead wagon. But for one of us..." the old man stopped for a racking spell of coughing and the blood came from his throat in clots. He gasped and sagged back, but the words went on thickly, and Guy bent close to the bloody lips.

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in order to hear.

"I couldn't tell you before. It would have been cruel to let you know. But I have to tell you now. There is an organization of rebellious people, active, brave, intelligent—men who know, women who have suffered loss. They reached me, never mind how, and they managed to give me a way of escape. The time is overdue, but they may still be waiting. Listen, Guy, listen!" he implored as Arnold raised his head to the sound of a heavy tread outside, but the feet passed on without entering. Guy knew the next sound of feet he heard would most probably be several guards who would kick the life out of them, cart them off to the morgue.

The old man's voice was trailing out weakly: "It is a strange doorway, the doorway of death, but you must pass through it to escape!"

Arnold was sure the old man was becoming delirious and raving, but he humored him, nodding and bending his head close to listen. "I'm listening, Doctor Epp. But I don't understand...."

"They told me they would send a ship to pick me up from the field of flame on the first day of last month. I was to take a certain drug they gave me, smuggled to me by one of the guards. It causes a catalepsy very similar to death. They want the star map, of course; they're waiting for it. I wouldn't let it out of my hands, so they had to arrange for my escape. They told me they have stolen blueprints of the Valkir ships from the Dictator's shops, have built several, have a fleet building in secret. Earth is not made up altogether of cowards!"

SEEING SENSE in the old man's wandering words, Guy's aching heart surged with a vision of the secret battle being waged against the Brant overlords. He shook the old man, who had lapsed into silence, and he opened his eyes, looking up weakly. "What do you want? Let me sleep; go away...."

"I want the drug, Doc. Don't blank out now. If you've got it, tell me how to use it. Give me the star map—or better still, take the drug yourself. It was meant for you...."

The old man smiled, his throat hacking on a kind of chuckle. "That's the hitch, Guy. I'm too near dead. My heart wouldn't survive the effects of such a powerful drug. I've been waiting, hanging on to life, hoping for an opportunity to give you the map and the drug. But the time went past. It may be too late. Your only chance is that they will still be waiting, searching the dead bodies, hoping I'll be thrown out among them. It's a chance...."

The old man fumbled at his breast, and Arnold helped him get the little packet out of the lining of his tunic. There was the star map in a little roll no bigger than a feather quill, and there was a slim packet of white powder. As Guy straightened, he could hear the sound of several pairs of heavy feet approaching the cell.

"Take it quick, Guy! Hide the map in your armpit. They may strip the corpses, you know. Quick, open it, I'll do it!"

From somewhere the old man's long white fingers produced a folded bit of flesh-colored adhesive tape. Breathless with urgency, Guy opened his gray tunic and the old man placed the bit of rolled parchment against the flesh under his arm, smoothed the tape over it. As the keys rattled in the lock of the door, the old man whispered: "Take the powder, man! Take it quick. You've got to be dead or dying to avoid being beaten to

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death for sure. Quick, swallow it!"

Guy popped the powder into his mouth, paper and all, chewed rapidly and swallowed. Even as the cell door swung open to reveal the hulking figures of the prison's "emergency squad", Guy found his senses slipping into a strange, whirling blackness, his limbs finding sudden, delicious release from pain. He sank back beside the old man with a smile of languor, and as if with a swoop from a great height, blackness closed in about him. It was like falling... falling.... Dimly he heard: "One dying, the other about done. No use waiting, put 'em in the wagon."

Guy felt himself lifted by the feet and legs, a brutal thump as his body hit the steel bed of the high-wheeled stretcher cart. Then all was blackness and a far, dull roaring....

A FLAME was roaring like a furnace overheated. The heat was intolerable. Guy struggled to roll away from it. He opened his eyes to a blinding glare of darting, whipping flames. His body became once more a terrible agony of aching pain, but there was a new pain, the pain of burning, of flames. Life was in him, but with all the pain he didn't want it. The roar of the distant flames neared, the heat became unbearable. A sudden burst of agony more terrible than any before brought him to his feet only half-conscious, but aware at last that he must move or die. In a panting nightmare of unwanted awareness, he glared about him, found himself facing a wall of flame; breathing a pall of writhing smoke wreaths, found himself stumbling back across the smoking lava that formed the footing beneath him.

Then suddenly the veil was lifted from his numbed mind and he screamed in the terrible knowledge that he was trapped upon the plain of fire—the place the prisoners all knew was used as a burial ground by the prison. No need to dig graves, when a periodic outpouring of flaming gas swept the nearby plain with devouring flame that cleansed away the bodies without labor or trace.

He wrenched his protesting muscles into action, ran stumbling and falling, getting up and falling again—on and on in a blind panic. His mind could not adjust to the sudden shock of falling asleep in his cell and awakening to see the advance of a wall of flame over the burned rocks of the plain of fire that was the prison burying ground.

To the right, to the left, and close on his heels, the flames walled off the horizon. Ahead was only the smoking, scorched rubble of the plain, knee deep in ash that rose in smothering clouds as he moved through it. Ahead was nothing, the coiling, wind-tormented smoke wraiths, and one tall, graceful figure which gestured to him. Fantastic apparition of strange beauty, Arnold's mind told him, to see as he died. A woman clad entirely in black, helmeted in black, her great eyes coming closer and her white hands strange with unbelievable grace as they reached... Her words were suddenly harsh and angry on his ears.

"Where is my father? He was to be here days ago. Speak. Speak out, or you'll get no help from me!"

Arnold stopped, his numbed mind trying to separate fantasy from reality, dream from the living hell around him. The angry voice went on, anxious with a driving urgency. "Speak up, you ghoul! We have only minutes left in which to find him! The flames will sweep over the whole plain!"

Trying hard to remember out of

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the mist that still clouded him, undoubtedly caused by the drug in his body, Arnold said, "Doctor Epp is dead. He gave me the drug. There is no need to search for him. He is really dead."

The precious seconds ticked by as the woman stood staring into his face, and if Arnold could have seen his own scorched blackened visage, he would not have blamed her for shooting him down with the strange, ugly weapon she bore, clenched now in one of her white hands. Unbelief swept over her questioning white face, her great eyes darkened into despair and anger.

"You stole my father's drug! You are but another murderer, like the rest who put him on Harkor! Stay here, you thief, and burn with the man you robbed of life!"

The tall, graceful, black-uniformed figure turned, a look of horror at his deed distorting her features into hate, and she sped away with lithe strides across the smoking plain.

Arnold stood, still numbed, his body utterly refusing his horrified mind's frantic command to follow after her. Then at last he began to run again, pursuing the woman in black. Her figure appeared briefly ahead, magically wreathed in the coiling smoke, then disappeared. As Arnold came to the spot, he saw she had ducked into the metal wall of a black-painted ship's hull. A long tongue of flaming gas licked at his ankles. He leaped despairingly away from it, found himself facing the round opening into the ship. But the big metal door was swinging shut in his face!

Arnold rammed one foot into the gap, howled in anguish as the heavy metal crushed down on his ankle. A sharp heel stamped on his toes and he nearly pulled his foot back from pain. Then full realization of his plight came to him. He lunged against the door powerfully. It gave before him. A gout of flame licked after him as he fell in upon the metal floor, and Arnold found himself beating at his flaming clothes, howling with agony as the cloth burned through in a dozen places.

But there was no time. More flames leaped through the open door behind. Guy scrambled on his hands and knees, forced the big door shut against the fire. Weakly he leaned against the metal, with one hand managed at last to fasten the catch. He sagged down weakly, half unconscious, knowing that the fire had nearly burned his lungs out. In minutes he was unconscious again. He did not feel the strange ship lift into the sky, did not know he was leaving Harkor behind, was once again fulfilling the youthful dream of crossing space.

WHEN consciousness came back, Guy Arnold knew from the lightness of his body that he was in free space. He drew a deep breath and the torment in his lungs told him he had escaped death by the smallest of margins. He found his arms swathed in bandages, likewise his face and legs. He groaned at the slightest movement with the pain of his many burns. Even his eyes were bandaged. Someone pressed something wet against his lips and he found that they were also burned. The voice seemed familiar, but he could not place it. It was a woman's voice, very smooth, and in his condition a kind of dream voice, perfect, thrilling, such as a lonely man might conjure up to amuse his loveless nights.

"I've got to feed you, no matter if your lips are burned. You'll just

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have to swallow, and I'll keep putting it in."

Guy put up one hand, pushed the spoon away blindly. "Did you find the doctor's map, Miss?"

Her voice was suddenly contrite, and very beautiful in its note of self-condemnation. "Yes, I searched you. I nearly opened the lock to let you blow out into space, but you were unconscious and I wanted to make sure. To think I almost condemned you to death from an assumption so unfounded in actuality. It taught me a lesson."

Arnold sighed loudly, utter relief at finding himself in good hands and off the prison planet making him giddy. The girl's voice went on in the darkness close beside him.

"I thought you were some prison sneak who had gotten hold of Dad's secret and stolen the drug we got for him to help him escape. But thank God he gave you the map. That explains everything."

Arnold swallowed, turned his bandaged head toward the sound of her voice. "You're his daughter Anthea? He talked of you several times, but we got little chance for real conversation. He only told me his secret when he was dying himself, for he still hoped to be able to last some way. You see, his heart was too far gone, and his lungs were affected by Harkor's air. He couldn't have lived if he had taken the drug."

Her voice came again. Apparently she had forgotten about feeding him. "I doubt if the map will do much good. Nobody but Dad could understand it. The Valkirs showed him what was on it that was important, but he never put it in writing, and we won't be able to decipher it. So the whole thing is futile. We had built a lot of hope on Dad and that map."

"It's not so futile," said Arnold, raising himself close to the sound of her voice, scenting the soft perfume of her hair. "It's not so futile. I glanced at the map once, and I think I can decipher it. I am an astronomer. I am the man who sighted the Valkir ship when it landed, computed its location, and reported it to Security Police. That's why I was imprisoned, so that no one would ever learn that such a ship existed."

ANTHEA gave a bitter laugh. "The Dictator's men are utterly efficient. They leave no opening through which misfortune might come to them, except their own delight in torture. They leave men alive, and while there is life, there is hope. My father got information to me about the ship. And because of it retribution will come to them, soon or late. The string grows shorter by the hour. . . ."

Arnold felt a sudden deep kinship with this girl who had suffered as he himself had suffered, who could voice the bitter thoughts in his own mind.

"Do you know what is on that map, Anthea?" he asked.

"I haven't the slightest idea. We only know that Father had learned something from the Valkirs before he was forced to operate. He told us that much in one short minute when our guard reached him. The guard had only time to give him the drug and tell him the day to take it, and since then we have wondered what his whispered secret could really be. We knew there was a map, but of what we couldn't imagine."

"It's a star map. It locates a cache of Valkir weapons, mightier than anything their ship bore into our Solar System. That star map will lead us to it. We must go there now,

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before the Dictator learns that it exists."

The girl pressed him back on the pillows of his bunk. "You're a pretty sick man to plan any such expedition into space, Mr. Arnold. It would be better for us to return to Earth and get the help of my friends, who built this ship. They have the organization to make use of such weapons."

Arnold struggled up again, against her protesting hands. "We can't take the chance of that map's falling into the Dictator's hands. We might be seen, captured before we ever land. By this time he has set up a constant patrol to watch for Valkir ships, in case their people send out a party to search for them. That must be his greatest fear, the Valkirs themselves. We can't take the chance. Too much depends on our getting those weapons."

The girl's voice was thoughtful. "You might be right. I'd feel a lot safer if this ship bore weapons strong enough to fight off any of the Dictator's cruisers that happened to sight us. It's not fitted for fighting, as we didn't want to waste any strength where it wasn't specifically needed. Do you think you could actually find the Valkir cache?"

"I can tell you better after I study that map. Will you take the bandages off my eyes?"

"You're pretty badly burned. I don't know what to say. . . ."

For reply Arnold reached up with his bandaged hands and began to paw clumsily at the gauze over his eyes. She took his hands down, began deftly to unwind the medicated bandage.

HE FOUND his eyes were nearly blistered shut, but sight of her flushed and lovely face was reward enough for the pain of the broken blisters.

"You're beautiful!" said Arnold.

She gave an embarrassed laugh. "You're just not used to seeing young women. I'm quite ordinary in appearance, really."

"With eyes like that you call yourself ordinary? Even without that rose-petal skin, and that poetic line of jaw. You *must* know you're beautiful!"

She laughed and turned away. Over her shoulder, as she went into the next compartment, she murmured softly, so that he was not sure he heard: "If you insist, I'll admit the idea is not unpleasant."

Guy had a momentary vision of Jane Seymour and felt guilty. He felt certain Jane would be waiting for him, but he put the thought aside.

She came back in a second with the bit of parchment, on which the weirdly complicated golden tracings of the Valkir map-makers had noted down a certain point in space. As he took it in his bandaged hands, Arnold felt his heart sink. How could such a thing ever be translated into understandable symbols—although the constellations and attendant celestial mathematics would be easy for him?

But after some hours of study, it did not seem so difficult. He readily recognized the constellations forming the background, could almost identify the particular star about which the orbit of the planet they sought was drawn in red. But their own position in space, relative to the point they sought to reach—this he was having difficulty working out.

He knew Harkor's position in space, from his observations during his trip on the prison ship to the fiery planet.

"Get me some kind of star chart from your own navigation charts.

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There must be some point of correlation from which we can work. I can't understand these symbols, but I can recognize the stars, and I can almost guess what direction we have to travel. What I can't figure is how far it may be. You see, here's Earth on their chart. The line of their own course swings in a long curve into our Solar System. Over here is Harkor—you can recognize that double sun you see from Harkor. Harkor itself isn't shown, of course, as they knew nothing of it. Well, we can get to this point on their course, which is near enough to the cache, as it is indicated by this red circle. Will this ship travel that far? Have you fuel for such a distance?"

"The Valkir ships are fuelless, Mr. Arnold. They have a magnetic vortice engine which draws energy from the forces of space itself. It will travel just as long as nothing goes wrong with the machinery. And nothing seems to go wrong. It is quite silent and apparently foolproof."

"Good. Then we can follow the same course they took, after we pass the double sun. Their course is drawn right through it. Harkor is almost on the course itself. We have already made the first leg of the journey, and if we returned to Earth, we'd only have to retrace our course. We might as well take the secret cache back with us!"

ON THE LITTLE chart the cache of the Valkirs was marked plainly enough, but to locate it from the meager data they were able to decipher from the Valkirs' puzzling hieroglyphics was another thing. The two innocents in space found themselves searching for a needle of indeterminate nature and size in a haystack of infinite complexity—the Universe itself.

Guy spent hours, days, weeks—bent over the bit of baffling artistry of the Valkir chief's handiwork, trying to deduce just what certain marks signified. He had narrowed the search to a path between a white dwarf and a vast red sun; but between these two bodies they found some two score bodies circling, not even mentioned on the necessarily skeletal chart. Too, there were whole swarms of variously-sized asteroids in a belt about the big red sun. Just how the Valkir chief meant to find the right body himself, unless he meant to rely on memory alone for the last step, was impossible to guess. The problem was unsolvable unless certain marks were a pictographic description of the body for which they searched. If so, Guy was unable to grasp the obscure connection. So they searched for some clue among the two score bodies themselves, and their eyes grew weary scanning the barren fire-scarred surfaces of planet after planet for any mark which might show a similarity to the obscure marks on the chart.

One thing they looked for was a white cross, and another was a gold circle, the whole forming a point on a larger golden circle they had decided represented the orbit of the disputed body about the great red sun. The red sun Arnold was sure was the same as that represented on the chart by a tiny red dot.

Anthea was certain the white cross marked the cache, and the gold circle marked the planet or asteroid, the larger circle the orbit. But Guy realized that their whole mental approach to analysis of the system of notation used by the Valkirs might be seriously at fault.

To search each of the asteroids in the crowded asteroid belt was an impossible task. Their time was limited

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by the amount of food they carried. They decided to leave the asteroid belt until the last, and search the larger bodies at a distance for distinguishing marks. They felt that the Valkirs would have made some notation to make their own subsequent search for the place easier—for instance, in the area enclosed by the golden circle was a tiny sketch of a thing that looked like an obelisk surmounted by a ball. They suspected this represented some natural formation on one of the bodies which was a landmark, situated near the cache.

AS THEY cruised hopelessly above one desolate landscape after another—the whole planetary system seemed to have been swept by a burst of fire from one of the suns at a time not long in the past. Little life was seen, even of plants. With their eyes constantly alert, they were both falling into increasing despair. Their small stock of food was running out. Their eyes met often, in a kind of mutual pity for each other's increasing hunger. Arnold was sincerely worried about the girl's health. He was sure he was inured to lack of food from his long semi-starvation on prison fare. But the girl was losing weight. Every day her face looked more pinched, her eyes more haggard in her wan face.

"We've either got to find natural food on one of these desolate globes, or give up," Guy stated huskily.

The girl flamed suddenly, her eyes flashing in anger. "Don't talk about giving up! We'll either find the Valkirs' weapons, or die searching. I'm not complaining."

Guy shook his head sorrowfully. "I'm used to being half-starved. I can stand it. But you've got to have food; you're getting thinner each day. I can see it. I feel responsible for starving you."

The girl stood up, leaving her place beside the port where the field glasses hung always on a ready strap. "I'll get used to it, too, Guy! Keep your eyes busy while I scare up some of the last of the beans. We're not licked while there's a can of food in the locker."

Arnold sighed. When the food finally gave out, what was to sustain them on their long journey home? This was madness—but it was madness to cruise back into the hands of Andrew Brant and his son, too. Guy started, his weary mind coupling the name of Brant with the beloved image of Jane Seymour. With him out of the picture, he wondered if Jane had fallen for young Brant? The burly officer would have become the most eligible bachelor on the face of the Earth after his father's accession to total power!

Guy shivered with a little premonition of future revelations in that field, and put the thought aside. Of course, Jane must be waiting for him patiently, and young Brant had never even seen her again after affairs had given him so many other things to do. It was an unworthy thought, after all. A girl like Jane could never seriously consider a man of Brant's obvious lack of the deeper mental attainments.

He put the bitter memory of his long days of waiting for some contact with people and with Jane Seymour aside, sure that she had remained faithful. He was unwilling to consider that she might have found someone else by now, be happily married, and totally unaware that anything had happened to him more dismal than an urge to run away to the South Seas.

He bent again to his scrutiny of the rocky desolation below, and

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started suddenly as his eyes glued themselves to a tall, dark obelisk of natural rock, a spire of dark stone surmounted by a roughly globular sphere of the same rock. It was a striking landmark, and it was similar to the little drawing on the chart. He reached out and rang the buzzer to attract Anthea's attention up forward, shouted into the intercom between the rear compartment and the bridge.

"Check our forward flight, Anthea! There's one of the pictographs below!"

A moment later, as his eyes spotted a great pale white cross stretched out on the smooth surface of the ancient lava flow below, obviously the work of paint and the hands of some intelligent being, he shouted: "Anthea, we've found it! We were right. It's below, behind—my God, girl, stop this ship!"

THE WHITE cross was a painted streak of chalky stuff upon the burnt lava, where they set the ship down. Nearby reared a short, stubby spire of rugged natural rock, one among many, but one obviously related to the white cross because it was nearest.

"They must have wanted to be able to locate the cache in a hurry themselves," said Guy. "In case they had to flee pursuit. It's so plainly marked. It's no wonder the Valkir didn't want the map to fall into the wrong hands."

In the face of the natural spire of eroded rock was set a smooth circle of metal, set flush without sign of handle or lock or other means of entry. The metal defied their tools, the cutting torch marred it not at all.

Hours after they had found it, Guy and Anthea leaned against the disk of metal weakly, worn out and again vastly discouraged. They had not even scratched the door, let alone budged it from its deep socket. Guy had a sudden inspiration.

"If it was a safe, a safe-cracker would drill little holes around it, and then blow it outward. It might work the same way. I'll drill holes in the rock around it—the drill will penetrate that easily—then I'll pour in nitroglycerin. You melt it out of dynamite, you know, and we've got that."

The drill broke off in the rock on the third hole, as if it had struck another metal deep inside the rock. Guy leaned back against the metal disk wearily, was startled to find it slowly teetering, pivoting. Guy leaped aside as the thing loosed and fell heavily outward with a great clang.

Anthea nearly went into hysterics at the expression of bewilderment on his face. Between laughs she deduced the answer to the mysterious opening of the door.

"You see, the Valkirs must have had some way of creating a vacuum inside, some chemical to absorb the air after they placed the disk there. Your drill let air get past the seal, like opening a can."

Together they entered the stygian opening behind, expecting some wonderful mechanism or array of weird and terrifying weapons too terrible even to be brought where an enemy could get them. Guy's flash swept the little tunnel, which ended in a little, round burrow of rock—in which sat a small metal box, dingy, battered and covered with dust.

They stood looking down at the sole object in the little tunnel, and their faces were pitiful.

"Is this what we searched for until we are sure to die of starvation if we spend more time searching for other caches? Is that what we wasted our last days looking for?" each of them thought inwardly, but neither of them

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voiced the thought to the other. Instead, Guy picked up the box gingerly, saying: "We can start back, Anthea, we've got what we came for."

Anthea was not so sure. "I think it's a decoy, set there to delude searchers into thinking they have the real thing. Let's not be too hasty. Look behind. And we'll look for other places nearby. Then we'll take a look at our chart again for further information we might have overlooked."

Guy was not listening. He was twiddling with the one small dial on the top of the box that looked so much like a discouraged plumber's tool box. And he was rewarded with a quiet little hum of power from the interior.

"It's loaded, Anthea! It has power inside—I can hear it. Now all we've got to do is figure just how its used."

But his guessing success was over. The box rewarded him with no display of deadly fireworks, and he finally gave up.

ON THE VOYAGE back, exhausted and hungry, they hardly found energy to console each other, except in monosyllables. Tinkering with the dial on top of the box produced no discernible results. They were beaten by this last disillusionment. Their return was not a homecoming, but a retreat back to prison for Guy, a return to a hiding, hunted existence at best. Silently Guy cursed the chance that had given him first sight of the strange ship out of space, that night that seemed so very long ago.

A month went by and they began nearing Earth. Their food supply was nearly gone, and what they ate barely kept them alive without moving around the ship except for emergencies. Still Guy tinkered despairingly with the strangely unresponsive box on which they had based such foolish hopes. Quite suddenly Guy discovered that when he turned it three notches to the right and six to the left, and then returned it to its original position, the hum inside changed. He realized from that fact that a response from the box came only from a certain combination of turns; like a safe dial, it had combinations.

He procured a pencil and paper to keep track of his experiments, and set himself to learn the combinations by trial and error. At last he was rewarded, when the round, screened orifice in front began to drip forth tiny globules of silvery, tenuous, floating appearance. But try as he might, the globules did nothing but float upward, spreading into a disk of almost invisible energy before they disappeared, apparently passing through the hull and out into space. But he kept working, trying all possible combinations of turns, knowing the marks around the dial must mean a certain sequence was needed. In the end he was rewarded, though the discovery nearly caused their death.

Twisting the dial in a complicated series as the drops emerged, he noted they changed, began to hum and vibrate as they expanded—and suddenly he felt he was strangling, saw and heard the air rushing out of a round hole that had appeared in the hull overhead.

Guy dropped the box, leaped to place a heavy rubber mat over the hole in the hull. As the mat bulged outward with pressure, he scrambled about, seizing other mats from the floor, reinforcing them with lengths of board from the food crates. At last he had stopped the leak from further disruption, and a great sigh of relief escaped him as he sat down to ponder this development.

Anthea came in from her bunk, eyes still heavy with sleep.

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"How can we use a weapon that knocks a hole in our own ship?" he asked her as she stood with open mouth looking up at the litter of debris he had stuffed into the circular opening.

Her eyes were suddenly filled with comprehension. "I've got it, Guy! All the little globules it gives off are weapons, are bullets, sort of—but they only act at the focus you give with the dial. That's what the markings mean—the distance. It's exactly like the sight on a rifle. At three hundred yards you've got to raise the sight three notches. See?"

"For Pete's sake, it's been working all the time! I only found it out when I pulled the focus in to a dozen feet. Now we've got to pull up close to a target and practice with the thing. How dumb can a man be?"

Anthea smiled softly. "As dumb as a woman, of course. Everybody is blind at times. But we should have guessed that one sooner."

THE CIRCLING space guard about Earth signaled the approach of a strange ship. As the new government of Earth feared one thing only—the approach of a search party looking for the vanished Valkir crew and the captured ship—the signal caused a score of armed space fighters to take to the sky from the base near New York. Their orders were brief—shoot down the strange ship without warning. Most of them knew why—if the Valkirs ever found out what had happened to their voyaging comrades, it would be all up with the Earthmen's plans to spread into space. And the strange ship, built exactly like their own except without the painted insignia of the Red-and-Gold World emblem, could mean only that here was the search party looking for the fallen Valkir ship.

The strange ship was slowing in a wide curve to enter a braking orbit about Earth. The deadly fleet of the Dictator's navy swarmed up in a wide, full-throttle spiral, spread out as they neared the stranger, came nearer—and the order to fire flashed from ship to ship.

But the stranger did not wait for destruction. From its bow sprang suddenly a swarm of tiny glowing lights, which expanded rapidly as they became more tenuous—and each light behaved as if guided by a mind of its own, intent on reaching one of the ascending attackers.

Andrew Brant, Sr., watching the combat from his quarters in the great new World State House, which his friends and ninety per cent of the people knew as the "Imperial Palace", felt a chill of dread sweep over him as his fighting space craft surrounded the stranger from out of space. For there was something weird about the behavior of the little swarm of expanding lights that flowed from the nose of the ship.

Quite suddenly one of the Dictator's craft nosed over, began to fall, end over end, slowly at first—then flashing Earthward with a flaming banner behind, then suddenly disintegrating in a burst of flame.

One after another, as if playing follow-the-leader, Brant's ships, the real basis of his power, nosed slowly over, and exploded. As Brant swung his telescope to watch the next movements of the deadly stranger, it was nowhere to be seen.

Search as they might, the Dictator's scouts could locate no trace of the warlike visitor. Days passed and the tension of dread increased, rather than lessened. Who was the deadly visitor? Where had he gone? What did he plan?

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GOVERNMENT Headquarters, newly built in New York, a half-mile high building named by Brant the "Coordination Building", buzzed with tension, a suspense of waiting. For young Andrew Brant had decided to take over the reins of government from his father, and the younger element of the top-heavy military structure were primed for the kill. So far as Brant, Jr., knew, the old man had no inkling of his intentions.

On the top floor, behind a truly elaborate desk of burnished metal, his heavy shoulders togged out in a flaming red tunic with a row of imposing medals across his massive chest, Andrew Brant, Jr., sat in his suite—today to become the new Dictator of the World. That is, if everything went all right. The old man was to be marooned on an Island in the Pacific with a military guard to keep him out of mischief.

"Zero hour ten minutes away," repeated Brant nervously to the three officers of his father's personal guard. They had been carefully going over plans, and there should be no hitch.

A lank and sour-faced officer reassured Brant Jr. "Everything will go off as scheduled. Quit worrying! The rank and file won't even know there's been any change. The men will follow the officers in control. These officers have all been promised things they never got, have come over to us as a man. The only chance of failure depends on treachery. One of them might figure the old man would reward him better than we would, and spill the beans. But I've tried to cover that by having them watch each other, and give no one who knows a chance to be alone and phone the old man."

Young Brant grinned, his bulging black eyes giving off a sinister twinkle. "Even if he does, the old man's personal secretary is bribed, she wouldn't let him through. It will all come as a complete surprise to the old boy! Well, we've touched on every possible eventuality—better get to your posts. See you in the Imperial Palace in two hours, with the old man on his way to Isolation Island. Hah! He won't enjoy retiring."

The three officers filed out and Brant turned from the desk to begin striding up and down the room. What he planned was a simple enough coup for him, though no one else was in position to pull it off. The old man had already turned over most of the hard work of governing to his son. The son wanted some particular cherries that the old man forbid, however.

In just two hours, Brant, Jr., told himself, he would have complete control of the World Government. The visiphone on his desk flashed, and Brant leaned over to flick the switch.

"Miss Jane Seymour to see you, Coordinator Brant," a voice informed him.

Brant rubbed his hands. "Send her in. Just the person I want to see."

JANE ENTERED the flashy suite of offices by the outer door, situated where Brant could see her through the one-way glass, but could not himself be seen. To enter here, she would have to pass four side chambers, in each of which Brant kept four special guards always on duty. By the time a visitor had reached the Coordinator, there was little possibility of danger for him. They were searched in each room, and passed under the X-ray plate which betrayed metal with a loud gong.

Jane came through this ordeal somewhat flustered, with her clothing not quite as smooth as usual. As she entered, she moved toward Brant with hands outstretched, her lovely

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mouth twisted in a grimace of distaste.

"For Heaven's sake, Andrew, must those guards of yours paw over me every time they see me? It's positivly indecent! Kiss me, and perhaps I'll forgive you again. But it's got to stop! If you want to see me, it will have to be where half the army doesn't see me first."

Andrew took her hands, drew her in an embrace, kissed her heartily. A slight agitation of the heavy drapes beside the window wall that gave on a view of most of downtown New York was unnoticed by either of them. After a few seconds, Brant and Jane moved hand in hand to look down on this view. Brant said: "After today, Jane, things will be very different in our life." His hands made a gesture over the teeming city below. "All that hive will be mine to command. I'm replacing Father as head of the government. Most of the people will not even know there's been a change. Do you think you'll like being the wife of the World Ruler?"

Jane turned again toward him, placed her hands on his shoulders. "Oh, you're wonderful! Who else would even dare think of it? Such audacity! And to think you will lay that at my feet."

Quite suddenly, the heavy drapes at their right parted and a figure stepped out.

"Guy! Guy Arnold!" cried Jane, then stood mute, terrified by the hate in his eyes.

Guy, though now shaved and with fairly presentable clothing, was no longer the fresh-cheeked young aide to the astronomers of Rops Observatory. Gaunt, haggard, his eyes still surrounded by scar tissue from burns, his face was a horror to behold. From his shoulders hung a plain metal box of a curiously alien appearance, and in his hand was an ordinary .45 automatic.

"Emperor Brant, rat and son of a rat," mused Guy, the automatic swaying up and down as if he was undecided whether to shoot the sleek, red-coated would-be Dictator in the stomach or the head.

"How did you get in here?" shouted Brant, his voice purposefully as loud as he could bellow, to attract the guards from the outer rooms.

"It was simple. The ventilators from the roof, if you must know. Your watch dogs are a stupid outfit."

"Your escape from Harkor—" Prout said. "It was never reported."

"I died," answered Arnold laconically, his eyes filming over with a kind of red haze of hate for this creature.

Jane Seymour came out of her stupor almost at once, and moved to one side to watch the two men. But as they stood there staring at each other without either making a move, she straightened suddenly, her eyes not on Guy Arnold, but upon Andrew Brant, Jr.

"You told me he had mysteriously disappeared, Andy! You lied to me."

BRANT SHRUGGED, his eyes wary on the gun in Guy's steady hand. "My father had him imprisoned, to stop his mouth. It was none of my doing, but I had to keep quiet about it."

Guy's words were harsh, a little wild. "You lie, Brant. There was no need to imprison me. I was fool enough to believe everything you told me then. You wanted me out of the way, to get Jane for yourself."

Jane slithered close to Guy, raising her undeniably lovely arms, cooing in dulcet tones: "Oh, Guy, and all this time I was sure you were dead! Can

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you forgive me? I know how you must have felt, receiving no letters, no word from any of your friends, unable to write. . . ."

And speaking so, she successfully got herself between Guy and Brant. Putting her arms about his neck, she hung her weight there, reaching for Guy's lips with her own. But her purpose, in spite of her attempt to make it seem unconscious interference, was glaringly obvious. In Guy Arnold's keyed-up nervous tension, her interference was an inexcusable blunder betraying a traitorous intent. He thrust her ruthlessly aside, saw Brant as he dived behind his desk, and dived after him just in time to crash the gun barrel into his face as he attempted to pull a gun from the desk drawer.

The blow slammed Brant into his seat behind the desk. Guy kicked the peculiarly complex weapon he had pulled from the drawer to one side. Then he swung his glance to Jane, and seeing the frustrated expression on her face, suddenly snarled: "Don't come near me again, Jane! Too much depends on this, and you have no understanding of the issues, aside from your own selfish desire to be rich rather than honest."

"You misunderstand," cried Jane, but the act seemed to go flat, for Guy did not answer. From outside, there came an increasing babble, as if something momentous were being discussed by a hundred shrill voices. It meant nothing to Guy, but to Brant it could mean anything, success or failure of his plan to remove his father from control of the World State.

With an effort Brant calmed himself, and his voice was again a suave and confident mockery.

"Your heroics are a little late, and will net you nothing, Arnold. By now I am Supreme Dictator, and if you think my father was harsh, you have yet to learn what will happen to my enemies."

Guy laughed bitterly. "You have missed a factor in your equation for success. The fact is, you will soon be dead."

"Where are the Valkir crew?" asked Arnold, his gun muzzle emphasizing each word. The meaning was clear to Brant. If he didn't answer, he got shot. If he did, perhaps there might be a chance.

With trembling hands and face pale as taffy, Brant mumbled: "We have them still, in cells in the underground blocks of the old Security Building. We couldn't let them go, and we didn't want to murder them."

Arnold sneered. "No, they might still be of some use. Now, what's the racket outside? It keeps getting louder."

Brant pulled his courage together. "That's the guard preparing to come in here after you, of course. What else?"

SUDDENLY a fusillade of firing came from the deep canyons of the city below. Guy strode to the windows, and behind him Jane Seymour peered down, too. The avenues below were filled solid with struggling figures, some uniformed in the black-and-gold of the original Security Police, others plainly in civilian clothes.

Guy swung back to Brant, who had chosen the moment to reach for the gun on the floor nearby. Guy snarled: "Hold it, Brant. If you touch that thing, you die right now. There's a riot in the city, and I want you to know what it's about."

Brant, in a panic of anxiety himself, leaned forward and snapped the audio of the news-visicaster on his

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desk. From the concealed speaker an excited voice began babbling: "Citizens in revolt, backed up by dissident military groups, have seized the Imperial Palace. The on-the-spot reporters insist that the elder Brant has disappeared, been abducted or slain. The younger Brant has not put in an appearance—and a temporary lack of any existing governmental authority is resulting in chaos as revolting troops seize arms and march on the Capitol building. . . ."

Brant, his face a study in despair and fearful indecision, watched Arnold as the man smiled at the evident distress the news caused the younger Brant.

"Incidentally, your little plot to remove your father miscarried through no fault of your own, Brant," Guy assured him. "The enemies you both made were informed, and were waiting and ready to make the most of the opportunity you handed them. The Brant dynasty ends as it began, in treachery."

Suddenly a louder, more terrible roar came from the sky outside. Brant, peering, saw the down-sweeping shapes of an armada of metal ovoids, exact copies of the Valkir space ship. Brant cried out in exultance: "Do you think they will defeat that force?"

"I think we will, and I have the means to do it. Now, if you value your remaining minutes of life, stay where you are while I dispose of the counter-attack against the young rebellion. I like the idea of a world free instead of as a footstool for you. . . ."

As he talked, Arnold had touched the dial on the shabby, dented metal box hanging from the strap over his shoulders. A hum of power rose from the box, and from a tiny slit in the front, little droplets of energy oozed, became shimmering crystals which took flight, tiny silver pellets of seemingly harmless beauty.

The tiny pellets flashed toward the circling, slaying ships, but became wider and wider disks as they ascended. One by one the ships of the distant fleet passed head on into the tenuous, shining disks, faltered, fell end over end, exploded, or dived toward the ground at full throttle. Terrific bursts of fire and heat came from the exploding craft as the weird power of the widening, shining disks reached into the vitals of the engines and let out the vorticial powers that fed the strange, other-world drives.

As Brant watched his space fleet—which up to that moment had been the greatest existing power in the world, holding under its threat all the myriad people of the Earth in complete helplessness—collapse and fall before the weird little box in Arnold's grasp, Andrew Brant, Jr., became a raging madman. He leaped toward Arnold snarling like a maniac, and Guy raised and steadied the automatic. But before he could fire, sanity returned to Brant suddenly, and he seized Jane Seymour and, holding her before him as a shield, backed toward the doorway.

ARNOLD turned back for an instant to make sure that all the murderous pack from the skies had been knocked down, took one glance at the empty sky so recently filled with the invincible powers of the World Empire. A few trailing streamers of smoke were all that was left in sight. Below, the streets were a litter of death, with few moving objects in view. Then Guy Arnold bounded after the fleeing Brant, the burning hatred bred in his long imprisonment driving him like a lash in his back. After the holocaust his

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men had brought to the streets of New York City, that inhuman monster must not escape.

In the outer office, where formerly the chosen had swarmed in earnest desire to propitiate the Brants, there was now only silence and emptiness. The riot, the nearness of sudden death, had driven the whole coterie of favorites into instant flight. As Arnold raced along the corridors, his mind found time to meditate upon this singular desertion. He was certain that, under the normal regime of democracy, no such cowardice was ever exhibited in any high office. It was a singular reflection upon the nature of the humans who had flocked about the usurper's banner.

Deciding that Brant would have fled upward, rather than down into the still dangerous streets, Guy raced up the first stairway he came to, and so found the roof. His guess had been right. Near the center of the roof stood a powerfully built, though small, monoplane in the gold and silver paint of the Security Police. Nearing it was Brant, carrying in his arms the now protesting Jane Seymour. He was finding her lush charms an armful, and he stopped suddenly, set her on her feet, and chopped a rather vicious slap to her fair cheek. Arnold could hear him snarl.

"Enough of your foolishness. You were ready to accept me when I looked like the best catch on Earth, and my power when it was the greatest in the world. Now that things don't look so good, you've got cold feet, eh? You don't want to run away with your sweetheart, you want to stay and be safe. Well, just forget your ambitions. You're going along."

Guy shouted as he raced to place himself between Brant and his escape plane. "You're not going anywhere, Brant! You might as well give up the idea right now. Your goose is cooked."

Somewhere Brant had acquired a gun in the interim. He raised it up and flashed a shot at Arnold, but Guy dropped flat as the gun gleamed in the man's hand. The shot went over his head. Guy couldn't fire for fear of hitting the girl. He bellowed: "Get out of the way, Jane, or I'll shoot you too. I'm not playing romance today!"

Jane Seymour twisted free of Brant's grasp, stepped lithely aside and placed the plane's fusillage between herself and the two men. Peering over the tail fins, she called: "Good luck, Guy, I've decided differently."

Guy fired twice as she got out of the way, but his aim was bad. But he put down his box, bounded in close, and as Brant steadied his gun for a sure kill, Guy flung his own weapon into Brant's face, smashing his handsome nose into a bloody smear. Brant stood pawing at his face, and Guy twisted the gun from his grasp, sent it sailing over the low parapet that enclosed the roof area. Then he smashed a fist into Brant's bloody face again.

Brant, letting out a bellow, closed with Arnold in a bear hug. His strength was superior, and he bent Guy back. Guy kicked him hard in the ankle, and the two men tottered and fell, with Brant on top.

ROLLING and kicking himself free, Arnold reached his feet, but Brant threw himself in a football tackle at his knees, brought him down again. Guy hammered at the hard, round head with his fists, but Brant lifted, slammed his weight down on the lighter man, knocking him breathless. In a haze of pain, Guy realized he was no match for the burly of-

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ficer, and he felt a sense of utter inferiority, the weakness of defeat welling up inside him. For the second time in his life, when it came to Andrew Brant, Jr., Guy Arnold had made a mistake.

But he twisted free, got to his feet painfully, found Brant waiting with fist cocked to finish him off. Guy caught the roundhouse swing on one elbow, and shot his own right home to the belly with a desperate exultation that he had been able to land the blow, as the bigger man bent nearly double with pain. In the best T.V. tradition, Guy brought up one knee into the face of the bent-over Brant, straightening him up. Brant staggered back, recovered, and Guy swung again and again, only to have his blows blocked. As Brant got his wind back, he dived suddenly in another attempt to bring the slighter man down where he could finish him. But Guy twisted aside and Brant fell heavily. Without the slightest qualm, Brant swung a hearty kick into his side. Brant rolled away, got up on one knee, his face twisted into a mask of pain and deadly fury.

"Now I *will* kill you, you dammed meddling whelp!" He lunged at Guy, his fists swinging wildly, in power-house churnings that could not help but land, driving Arnold back. The barrage of fists was too much for Guy's small skill. Ducking, blocking, taking fists in the face and body, Guy stumbled back, to hear Jane suddenly shrieking: "You're at the roof's edge, you crazy star-gazer!"

The insult, a kind of nickname she had often used on him in the distant past during their intimacies, sobered him like a dash of cold water. He lunged aside, leaped past Brant. Brant turned, frustrated in his attempt to batter Arnold over the edge. Guy was sure now that he could never beat the man. His hands were shaking, his legs would hardly support him, and his eyes gave him only a vague notion of his surroundings.

He stood there, waiting for Brant to move in and finish the beating—when the crack of a gun close beside him dissolved the mists. He saw a circle of dark crimson spread rapidly on Brant's torn tunic, and the sturdy legs of the man weakened. He sagged, tottered backward. His legs struck the low parapet. For an instant he swayed in a conscious effort to remain upright, then he fell out of sight. One strangled scream came up, faint and far below—then nothing.

Jane Seymour tossed the gun after the vanished would-be ruler. "To think I almost married that beast," she murmured, as she moved silkenly into Arnold's arms. Arnold stood there, breathing in the sweet, intoxicating perfume he remembered so well, that perfume that had been with him even in the fumes of Harkor, in the dark nights in his prison cell. His numbed hands touched the soft golden curls of which he had dreamed so ardently, and his swollen lips touched the soft, fragrant cheek of the woman he had loved so long....

Arnold stiffened up, thrust her back. "It's no go, Jane! You must have guessed, must have realized from the course events took, what Security Police did with the information I brought them. You saw the space ship, you knew the source of their power, knew what they did with me, yet you remained free. You were a traitor even then. You were ready to marry him, because he had so much to offer. You just aren't my type, Janey, old girl!"

Gently he removed her arms from about him, strode off toward the stair-head by which they had ascended. Waiting there he found a tall, dark-eyed girl with tears in her eyes, on

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her lashes. She didn't say anything, just took him to her breast. Guy sighed and quietly folded her into his arms.

THE POWER of the Security Police broken by Arnold's destruction of their space armada, the meeting next day of the World Council of Nations was a day of rejoicing. It was also a day of reorganization, of rapid-fire appointments and removal of all who had too-readily supported the Dictator, Brant, in his rapid assumption of all power.

Most surprising development was the appearance of the nine birdmen, the Valkir crew from whom Brant had taken the know-how of space travel and their other-world weapons. They stood before that body of representatives from every country on Earth, nine skeletal survivors of the cruel treatment and imprisonment Brant had given them. There were several stenographers who had been forced by Brant to learn their language in order to pump them of information. These, two men and three girls, interpreted the Valkir's words to the ruling body of the Earth.

"In spite of your treatment of us, the Valkir nation still offers you friendship. We understand what has taken place, and we offer our help in setting up safeguards against a similar usurpation of powers in the future."

The Valkirs had nearly recovered the full use of their will, and their weird faces were filled with joy at the unexpected release and the chance to return to their home in their original ship.

Anthea, sitting beside Arnold in the assembly, was weeping in her joy at the final outcome.

After the meeting, Arnold and Anthea sat quietly, hand in hand, as most of the others filed out of the huge assembly chamber. He was somewhat surprised to find the nine Valkirs standing nearby, gravely surveying the two lovers, and chirping oddly to each other. Arnold had not the slightest idea what it was about until one of the interpreters, a sleek blonde whom he vaguely remembered as the elder Brant's personal secretary, came to him and explained.

"They are waiting for you to return their box, the one you used to overcome the police fleet."

Arnold got to his feet, flushing. "Yes, yes. I'll get it for them. I certainly don't want it left on Earth. We've troubles enough without worrying what some fool would do with that!"

The blonde laughed. Like everyone else today, she was full of relief and a kind of holiday spirit—and her voice lowered to a kind of mocking semi-official monotone.

"They are also waiting until you are officially informed that you have been appointed Earth's ambassador to the nation of the Valkir. You two are to accompany the birdmen as Earth's first Interplanetary Diplomats. The appointment was made at their request, as they know the part you two played in turning the tables on Brant."

Arnold turned a thunderstruck countenance to Anthea. She seemed to take it as a matter of course. "I've known it for some time, Guy, but I wanted it to be a surprise. We'll have to be married first, I suppose. It would hardly seem decent, otherwise...."

"Married! You will?" Arnold grasped her to him. "A honeymoon on Valkir! And I was expecting to go back to Mount Rops and watch the automatic cameras for the senior astronomers. Anthea, you—you really like the idea? Just you and me, on a planet of utterly strange people,

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people who have reason to distrust, even hate us? It could be not only dangerous, but boring and tiresome and nerve-wracking, never knowing for sure what they were thinking. It could mean the toughest kind of work, making them understand Earth people. They may want to study us only to plan for our eventual distruction. They have fierce eyes, like hawks. . . ."

Anthea moved into his arms, pulled his head close, kissed him on the ear. "Silly! Look at their feet!"

Puzzled, Guy gave a glance, noted the birdmen's wide webbed feet which contrasted with their hawk faces in a bizarre, almost comic aspect.

"Yes," he smiled. "Everything will be just ducky!"

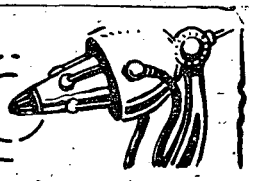
Whatever else these Valkirs might be, they were not predators. This race was not warlike.

"Okay, duckling, we'll go and see," whispered Guy.

Anthea giggled and he kissed her on the lips. The Valkirs nodded solemn approval.

THE END

SOUNDS THAT CURE



JON BARRY

THE MAYO CLINIC, which has been experimenting with ultrasounds, noise vibrating at 800,000 times a second, on cancers in mice, has recently sent out a small hope to humanity. A recent report issued by the Clinic says that these sounds can possibly be used to destroy certain types of small cancers.

They experimented with very small cancers which were just under the skin. These were treated by placing the sounding device against the skin. The vibrations were carried through the sounding cone almost to the end. The tip of the cone was filled with water which then transmitted the sounds directly to the skin.

This inaudible sound was applied only once, for 75 seconds. Some of the cancers were completely destroyed. Others were damaged, but their destructive growth was not appreciably checked. Where the cancers were destroyed by the sound, scars formed, with no sign of any remaining cancer. Where the cancers were not destroyed, the sound burned out a wedge-shaped portion of the malignant tissue.

While not proving anything definite, these experiments would seem to indicate that ultrasound could possibly be used successfully in cases where the diseased portion is accessible.

STRAIGHT DOWN

By Lee Owens

MEN HAVE penetrated into the crust which surrounds the Earth's core only a few miles, yet they are gaining knowledge of the Earth's center. How?

Most of our knowledge of the Earth's interior must come from indirect sources. An examination of meteorites discloses a different amount of iron that we suspect the Earth to be composed of, yet we assume that the meteorites stem from the same primal stuff as the Earth's substance. Why this discrepancy?

The answer to questions like these also comes indirectly from the scientist's largest and most powerful instrument—the Earthquake shock wave. A study of the reflections and refractions of Earthquake waves gives a surprisingly clear picture of the constitution of the center of the Earth. At about two thousand miles beneath the surface, the pressure is about a million and a half atmospheres and atomic structure collapses producing new forms of matter, in which rock becomes like metal. At the center of the Earth the pressure reaches 50,000,000 psi and the temperatures are around 40,000°F.!

It is obvious then why matter in the center of the Earth is not the same as that of meteorites which bombard it. Pressure can do strange things. Ordinary hydrogen gas, for example, when subjected to extreme pressures, first turns to a liquid as we all know. Then upon increasing the pressure it becomes a material resembling metallic sodium with a density almost as great as that of water!

As a result, then, scientists know that matter at our Earth's core bears little, if any, resemblance to the familiar elements we know. The seismographic shock waves which are recorded and plotted from their origin to their diminution, paint a pretty clear picture of exactly how the density of the Earth varies with depth and distance.

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READER'S PAGE

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Dear LES:

The March '52 issue of FA was pretty good, and I especially liked your very well done cover. Aren't we seeing enough of Uncle Joe these days, though? Now for the stories:

"The Travelling Brain" by Bill McGivern was wunderbar! This boy really has talent, LES.

Leading a close second comes Mack Reynold's "Your Soul Comes C. O. D." Speaking of Mack (I call him by his first name because I exchanged two—yes, TWO —letters with him last summer)—his first novel, "The Case of the Little Green Men", is hilarious. Nothing like it since "Rocket to the Morgue".

"He Fell Among Thieves" was very good, with excellent characterization and writing. This would have bagged first place if it weren't for the over-used plot. Finlay's not the type of illustrator for science-fiction mags, especially FA. He just doesn't seem to ring true in the stf field. Anyway, his shadings aren't too good for your pages. He has a market elsewhere, so get something lighter—you know what I mean.

"Brothers Beyond the Void" was fair. 'Nuff said.

Ah, now for the brickbats:

"The Master Key" was very, very poor. I hate the "cops and robbers in space" theme, and this was one of its worst extrapolations. I knew that AS has been catering to the type of audience who go for that, but I was hoping that you'd steer clear of it. Pure tripe.

Well, sorry I had to end the story ratings on such a sour note, LES, but that story was exceptionally bad.

Read in the *Fantasy-Times* that you've decided not to go digest size and reprint old AS novels, but are putting out a new magazine just for this purpose. Sure am glad. I'd really miss the present FA. See in the editorial that you planned to announce this in the April issue. Seems as if FT beat you to it. Wouldn't I be embarrassed if I were wrong, though!

Now for the reader's department:

The two best letters, in my opinion, were those of Mel Chase and Jim Harmon. In regard to Mr. Harmon's letter, however, there is no comparison between Bradbury and Heinlein. They work in two separate fields, entirely. One is master of the beautiful fantasy short story, sort of a futuristic O. Henry, while the other is the teller of technical and adventurous novels of the space lanes.

In regard to Wiley Gribble's letter, ah, Wiley, if we only could have a feature-length novel by Merrit in the near future!

You know, I have two main criticisms to make on the usual stf story, especially of the type found in AMAZING STORIES. The first, and most important, is that you always have some disgusting BEM chasing after our earth women, when our women should seem equally disgusting to the BEM. Would an earth man go chasing around after a BEM-ess? (I hope I use the correct terminology.) Of course not. So why should a BEM consider one of us desirable? I don't know what type of BEMS your writers are, but all the BEMS I know consider Earth females repulsive. Second is why, when the space traveller emerges from his ship, he says he is on Earth at last, and has come from Venus. These are only our names for these celestial bodies, and are of definitely earthly origin (especially Venus)!

I just saw the picture "The Shape of Things to Come" with Raymond Massey—on TV. This picture, in my mind, even surpasses "Destination Moon" and other stf pictures which have been raved about so greatly. Really excellent, considering its old age.

Well, I guess that's all for this time. I certainly did breathe a deep sigh of relief when I learned that you were going to keep your present format, LES, and am eagerly awaiting your new magazine.

Robert Dennis McNamara
50 Plaza Street
Brooklyn 17, New York

You're going to get an avalanche of irate letters dropped on your head from Finlay fans. ..... Ed.

NO TRIMMED EDGES PLEASE

Dear LES:

Your February issue was wonderful. Right off I would like to comment about trimmed edges. AMAZING would not be AMAZING if it had trimmed edges.

Now the ratings.

"A Child is Missing": a good story, best in the issue. Fairman's a good writer.

"What's on Your Mind?": nice, but if the free travelling between worlds depended on Rumm's and Rome's having the same

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ancestors, why wouldn't there be an infinite number of worlds where the same ancestors appeared?

"Pattern in the Dust": out of adjectives. Good.

"Pattern for Tomorrow" and "Spacemen Die Hard" rate last. The latter was terrible.

Letter commentary:

Mr. Name Withheld: Do you get your information straight from the horse's mouth about pen names? Also, why was the September FA bad?

To end this letter: an appeal to the editor. Get the back cover for illustrations. And make 'em good, the kind you can show your friends.

D. A. Sodek
1415 South Marsalis
Dallas, Texas

Why, what do your friends like to be shown? ..... Ed.

SCIENCE FICTION IN CHESS?

Dear Ed:

This is my first letter to your magazine. It probably won't be published but here goes, anyway.

Just finished the February issue of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. After seeing the cover painting I now hold a low opinion of Leo Summers. It was just no good! I liked the November cover by Ed Valigursky, though.

Your stories rate with me as follows: First place goes to "Pattern for Tomorrow" by Storm. Second place to "What's on Your Mind" by Lesser. Very good story. Almost rated it first place. Third place, "Spacemen Die Hard" by Geier. Tie for fourth goes to "Pattern in the Dust" by Jorgensen and "A Child is Missing" by Fairman.

The Reader's Page is the best part of the book. Couldn't you enlarge on it a little? While on the subject of readers, how about hearing from some of you? I'm 16 years old and I promise to answer every card or letter. I would enjoy hearing from fans in foreign countries, too.

Maybe this doesn't belong here, but I'll sneak it in anyway. Is there *anyone* in the world who can and is interested in playing chess by mail? If so, please write me at the address below.

Again back to the mag. As a whole, this was just a fair issue, but the stories are getting better. How about some mad-scientist and time-machine stories?

Donald Reynolds
Post Office Box 494
Jackson, California

Probably won't be published, huh? .... Ed.

MORE BOOKSHELVES WANTED

Dear Sir:

I have just finished the March issue of FA. I enjoyed all the stories even though none of them were what I would term unforgettable. I would place "The Master Key" first, with "Brothers Beyond the Void", "The Travelling Brain", and "Your Soul Comes C. O. D." following closely on its heels. "He Fell Among Thieves" was a good spy story but the ending, to me, seemed to be a letdown. But I still rated it B-.

Now, I have a big favor to ask of you. I have about six crates of stf mags in the garage and, although I hate to part with them, I'm afraid it is going to be necessary. At least until that happy day in the dim future when I can have a room with bookshelves on four sides.

Right now my three bookcases are filled with a collection of E. R. B.'s and about 15 sundry other stf books. I have collected in the past ten years.

If anyone is interested in buying (or possibly trading) magazines I would love to hear from each and every one of you. I have about 15 mags from 1938 to 1942 in AS and FA. I would like to read if I could trade some other magazines for them.

There are also seven Burroughs works I need for my collection, and five that need replacing. I'm only interested in those of practically new condition. I would like to trade old mags for them if possible as, as usual, I am financially embarrassed. Flat broke to you! If not, please send me your price list.

Betty Faulkner
137 East 59th Street
Long Beach 5, California

You won't have those crates much longer. ..... Ed.

HE WANTS MORE FANTASY

Dear Editor:

While I enjoyed your February issue, I would wish for more fantasy. After all, there are plenty of stf magazines, with only three fantasy mags and only one weird mag. Both "A Child is Missing" and "Spacemen Die Hard" should have been in AMAZING.

Incidentally, I'm afraid I don't agree with your enthusiasm for "A Child is Missing". To me, it didn't contain any of the elements you mentioned.

"Pattern For Tomorrow" was good, in my opinion.

I, for one, like supernatural stories. And I do wish that AS and FA could acquire a weirdzine for a companion. I like a few vampires and werewolves sprinkled in with my stf and fantasy.

Neal Clark Reynolds
704 North Spadra Road
Fullerton, California

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CALLING ALL FANS

Dear LES:

The February FA was really slow, but it was still swell, anyhow. "Pattern for Tomorrow" was good. Who is Mallory Storm? Not another pen name, I hope. "A Child is Missing" was also swell. I hope that Fairman's new job of editing IF won't stop him from writing more stuff like this. Jorgensen's fourth story for FA was nice.

The departments were all fine. I enjoyed your editorial immensely. One thing I object to is the fact that those cartoons take away valuable space. Either enlarge the editorial or remove them.

A few comments to the readers:

Name Withheld—Milt Lesser is not Stephen Marlowe. He is Rog Phillips. See my letter in AS for proof. Rog Phillips and P. F. Costello are two separate persons. Buck Rogers is gone, and Captain Video has undergone a change.

Jim Harmon—what you meant by LES hiding one aspect of her identity was that she was a shemale, right?

Robert D. McNamara—Whatsamatter? You tired of living? Sarge Saturn is gone, thank goodness! I agree with you, though; the Reader's Page needs to be pepped up. Think we can do it?

Donald B. Day—I think your index is a fine idea. All fandom should jump in and help out to the utmost. Heaven knows, I need one.

Calling all fans! Help me out, will you? I need plenty of back issues of FA.

The preceding was superficial, and rather dull, at that. My real reason for writing is the following:

With Volume 14 Number 5 FANTASTIC ADVENTURES will go digest-size. This was reported in the October *Fantasy-Times*, and it was confirmed by Howard Browne in the November 2 issue. The difference would be nil, except that the name will be changed to plain FANTASTIC. What I want to say is this: with a change in name, it makes a different mag. So, why not start it as if it *were* a new mag? Start it off with Volume I Number I and perhaps, some day, when the paper shortage is gone, maybe FA can make a return from the dead. I think that after all these years it deserves to rest in peace. Why should a new mag (that's really what it is, you know) cash in on the hard-earned good old FA?

Henry Moskowitz
Three Bridges
New Jersey

You called it. The new Ziff-Davis magazine, FANTASTIC, Summer 1952 issue, Volume 1, Number 1, makes its appearance March 21—the third in the ZD lineup of Fiction Group magazines. Now be sure to read each issue of AMAZING STORIES, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and FANTASTIC. ..... Ed.

TRASH? PERISH THE THOUGHT

Dear Ed:

The editorial: interesting. I'll check each issue from now on to make sure you keep your own commandments.

The stories:

(1) "Pattern for Tomorrow"—Storm; pretty good. Something seemed to be missing, though....

(2) "A Child Is Missing"—Fairman; this is the kind of story I like!

(3) "Spacemen Die Hard"—Geier; space opera. I don't like it.

(4) "Pattern in the Dust"—Jorgensen; good.

(5) "What's On Your Mind?"—Lesser; this was probably the best story in the book. What has the title to do with the story?

The shorts were average. Nothing to rave about.

The letter column was good, as usual. Who is the BEM that keeps his (her) name withheld? Ashamed to let anyone know he reads such "trash"? Mr. McNamara wants a feud? Good. I hope we get one started soon.

The illos were fair. Have you had Kiemle before? In any case, get more of his work.

Barry Prag
2555 N. W. Northrup St.
Portland 10, Oregon

The only other H. W. Kiemle illustration we've had was in the November 1951 issue of AMAZING STORIES, when he illustrated the story "The Pyramids From Space". ..... Ed.

OUR READERS WRITE

Dear LES:

About a year or so ago one of your issues of FANTASTIC ADVENTURES was so poor that I decided to write some myself. The stories are still in the pencil stage and I'm waiting for my typewriter to grow a little older. It's still new and has a tendency to make quite a few errors.

However, since reading the January issue of FA I'm a little scared of the idea of sending in *any* manuscripts. As far as I'm concerned, it's about as perfect as you can get.

I read the entire ish from stem to stern, even the ads, and I intend to keep it, instead of sending it off as I do other mags.

"Rest in Agony" I read three times before I felt satisfied. It cost me quite a bit of sleep, but it was worth it. If Jorgensen keeps that up he'll soon be on a par with Merrit and others.

If there is a single illo by Finlay in a mag I will buy it, that's how much I think of him, but I must say that Leo Ramon Summers has a masterpiece in his illo of "Satellite of Destruction".

There is just one more thing I want to

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say. No doubt some of your readers are old fans, and perhaps one of them can tell me the name of the story that was published in the old ARGOSY that had to do with a disembodied intelligence named Alpha, or was it Omega? He had a devilish sense of humor and was always getting the hero into trouble. He could also assume any shape or figure he desired. If I remember correctly, it came out about the same time Merrit's "Ship of Ishtar" was serialized, or shortly thereafter.

James J. Oggerino
353 East 87th Street
New York 28, New York

COME AND GET IT!

Dear Editor:

Due to lack of space, I must sell my collection of 221 mags, including about 20 pocket books. I have all the various stf and fantasy mags well represented, such as FFM, FN, TWS, AMAZING, PLANET, SS, OTHER WORLDS, FA, etc.—FFM from 1942 on. They contain all of Shaver, a great many Merrit, Taine, Phillips, Kutner, Geier and many others.

Now, this is the point—I do not want to sell them piecemeal, nor do I want to mail them anywhere. Whoever will call for them and buy them all can have them for $10.00. First come, first served. My phone number is Be. 6-4436, my address 79 Avenue O, Apartment C7, Brooklyn, New York.

Mrs. Helen Spilkin
Brooklyn, New York

Fair enough. ..... Ed.

ROSES AND THORNS

Dear LES:

Thank you very much for publishing my letter in the March FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, and going so far as to say it was the letter of the month. My new three-cornered hat fits nicely, and my hand is getting warm inside my coat.

However, all this aside, you asked me a question in your editorial remarks and I would like to answer it. You ask: "What makes you think that the future will be all sweetness and light...?" My answer: I don't—and I can't quite see how you could get the inference that I did from my letter. I quote from it: "...Bradbury writes fine stories and they do something that should constantly be done—remind Man of his humility." I think this clearly indicates that I am in favor of the continuation of the Bradbury type of story which is certainly *not* all "sweetness and light"; in fact, these stories are often nearly the exact opposite.

Your question brings several other interesting points to mind, though. You ask about the conditions of the future, and imply that they certainly won't be all good. But remember, we are dealing with a very specialized future—a science-fiction future, as it were. Stf is not, nor does it attempt to be an *exact* prediction of the future. It does attempt to predict the *possible* and at times the *probable* future.

Stf can deal with whatever phase of the future it wants to. It has dealt with the first trip to the Moon many times, sometimes with failure, sometimes with success. Obviously, science fiction can contain just as much "sweetness and light" or bitterness and blackness as the writers and editors want it to. I think that there should be more of a leveling off of the types. For either of the two extremes—"come to Mars and make the red blood of your brains soak into the ancient sands with an Ajax Ray-Blaster, you horrid thing" OR "come trip with me through this automatic mechanical paradise and let us un-zip each other's zippers on the cool green artificial meadows, you essentially fine creature" to predominate would not only be ridiculous, it would be intellectually and commercially unsound.

Despite its exaggerations and distortions, fiction is still a reflection of life, and never in life has *evil*—to me, *destructive forces*—ever been able to completely subjugate *good*—to me, *creative forces*—or vice versa. I doubt if the situation will change.

To turn your own question on you: What makes you think that the actual future (as opposed to the stf future which can be anything we want) will be all bitterness and blackness? It will be not only an extension of its past, which is our present, but of our past as well.

Never in the history of the human race has there been a moment so dark that there still weren't instances of beauty and love, romance and humor. Not in the days of the Bubonic Plague, which was certainly as deadly as an atomic war; nor in the days of the bloody wars of Ghengis Khan and Attila the Hun. I once talked to a man who was on the Bataan Death March. He had some funny stories to tell about it.

Life is not either all evil or all good, all triumph or all failure. It is one or the other, or both together in various degrees, depending on the individual viewpoint. Literature, as a reflection of life, and in particular science fiction, which I think is a great form of literature, should try to emulate life to some degree in that respect.

One of the reasons I don't like detective stories and Westerns is that the murder is always solved and the murderer brought to justice, and the ranch is always saved and the cattle-rustlers caught. In life, unfortunately, not all murders are solved and some murderers are never brought to justice, and lots of ranches are burned down and mortgages foreclosed and cattle rustlers go free.

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I see that you are announcing FANTASTIC Quarterly next issue. There was a nasty rumor that it was FA who was going pocket-size. I'm glad Ziff-Davis is going to bring out an entirely new magazine because I like FA as it is. It would lose much of its youthful charm and appeal in pocket size. FANTASTIC will mean a new magazine in addition to the regular editions of FA and AMAZING. I wish you the best of luck and deserved success with it.

Incidentally, in a previous letter of mine you published, I commented that you apparently wanted to hide one aspect of your identity, and headed the letter "HE DIDN'T GO FAR ENOUGH". Very few women have ever said that to me. It isn't safe. You remember the story about the young lady fan and the famous fantasy artist. She said, "You have such beautiful hands. They ought to be on a woman." He leered at her. "All right—you asked for it."

I note the lead story in the March issue is very timely. Well, I don't mind, if it helps you sell the magazine. It is remarkable how anything that is "timely" sells when it has often been said and more often proved that history is a constant repetition.

Jim Harmon
427 East 8th Street
Mt. Carmel, Illinois

You said it! ..... *Ed.*

SEE YOU ON THE MOON!

By June Lurie

TO ESCAPE from the Earth, a rocket would require a speed of at least seven miles a second. According to the report of one of the leading rocket fuel experts, Dr. H. L. Johnston, the director of jet propulsion research at Ohio State University, he has successfully tested a fuel which makes possible a rocket speed of eight miles per second—at least one mile per second more than required.

The fuel to which Dr. Johnston has reference is a liquid hydrogen. He first tested a miniature rocket motor which was about the size of a man's fist. This produced gases of around 15,000 miles per hour. Since the speed of a rocket missile can be approximately twice the speed of the escaping gases, according to Dr. Johnston the use of liquid hydrogen with liquid oxygen as an oxidizing agent would make possible the power to send a rocket ship out of the Earth's gravitational pull and to the moon.

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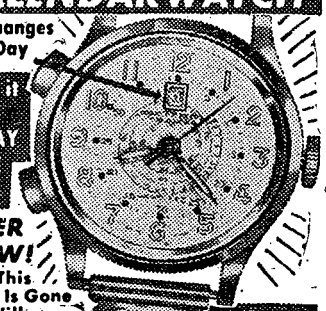

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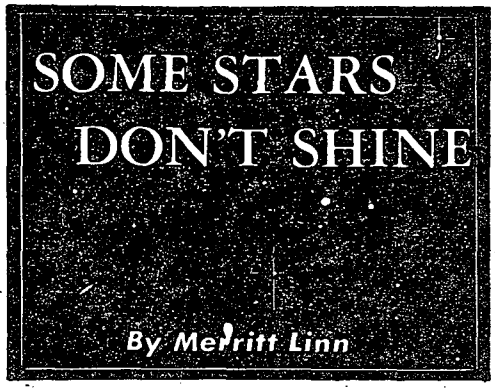

NO ASTRONOMICAL phenomenon has caused a greater revolution in astrophysics than the discovery of white dwarf stars. As of now, one hundred and fifty of these strange celestial glowers are known, forty-four of which were discovered in the last year.

The outstanding characteristic of the white dwarf is the fact that it is unbelievably dense; that is, matter is packed into it to the point where a cubic inch of the substance might weigh on Earth anywhere from two to a thousand tons! Furthermore, not a great deal of light is emitted by such stars and consequently they are hard to find.

The first of the white dwarfs discovered was a companion of Sirius, and it was located by observing that apparently some invisible body was perturbing the orbit of the large star. Search disclosed the white dwarf, which at first astronomers almost denied—the stellar performer was so absurd!

This star is just a little larger than the Earth; that is, it is about one forty thousandth the size of our Sun, and yet within that relatively tiny sphere is packed more matter than is contained in the Sun itself. One cubic inch of it weighs twenty-five hundred times more than a cubic inch of lead!

What is such matter—it cannot be "matter" in the ordinary sense of the word. Scientists have fancifully called it "neutronium" because it is essentially a packed array of neutrons and protons, utterly stripped of any subsidiary electrons—and absolutely unlike anything we can conceive of on Earth. Neutronium is the ultimate in matter, beyond which no further stripping or packing of atomic nuclei can go.

Astrophysicists hypothesize that a white dwarf is essentially a poised atomic bomb, but no actual connection between "variable stars" and white dwarfs has yet been detected. Regardless of laboratory technique, science doubts if ever it will be possible to duplicate conditions obtaining within dwarf stars, however desirable that would be. You can't squeeze an elephant into a mouse's frame!

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NEEDED —NEW ELEMENTS

UNTIL THE last forty or fifty years, only about half the elements classified in Mendeleyeff's Periodic Table had any practical significance. But the exhaustion of familiar elements, along with the tremendous strides made in technology, has made many unfamiliar names commonplace. Tantalum, rhodium, paladium, fluorine and ytterbium have very desirable properties.

Titanium, that marvellous metal stronger than steel and lighter than aluminum, is a perfect example of the entry of minor names into the big time. Most recently the metal *rhenium* has cropped up. This little-known, rare element has been produced on a tiny scale for quite a few years but only as a laboratory curiosity—at nine hundred dollars a pound! Investigation of its alloying properties has disclosed that the metal would make a perfect substitute for tungsten (or wolfram, as it is technically known). And this is important because tungsten is used in two particularly important applications: first, as filaments for vacuum tubes and incandescent lamps and, second, as the alloying element for metal cutting tools. Tungsten is hard to get and scarce in this country. Rhenium can to a certain extent replace it. The result is that a concentrated effort is being made to locate ore deposits and to devise extraction methods for the metal.

Because the pressure is on, there is every hope of finding ways to utilize rhenium, and it's quite possible it will soon be as familiar as magnesium.

While rhenium is a fine example of this need for substitutes and a fine demonstration of their value, there are any number of other little-known elements which will come to the fore eventually. The periodic table is being exhausted, metal by metal, gas by gas, element by element, and soon the only thing left to do will be to create new elements—and don't think the atomic physicists won't do it!

Leo Lewin

IT'S HERE TO STAY

ALL OVER the world the helicopter is sneaking into the news, giving a preview of the future's prime vehicle. The helicopter is more than here to stay; it is here to take over the role of the airplane in almost every capacity. The only thing it isn't intended for is long-distance work—and in that role the plane will be displaced by the rocket. In keeping with this minor revolution, the gas-turbine boys are entering the racket by applying their in-

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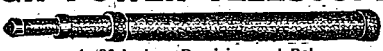

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When and if the pressure of war is withdrawn, the helicopter will take over its rightful role in aerial transportation; that is, it will fly anything everywhere. Oddly enough, or perhaps naturally enough, the helicopter is a war-baby in that its usefulness and its practical development depended upon the very war which now restricts its production to the military.

There is some slim hope that helicopter kits will be available in the not-too-distant future, and (how different from their reaction to conventional planes) many people are waiting for a chance to build their own. The inherent slowness and vertical rise of the helicopter make these machines "naturals" for the average man. There are thousands and tens of thousands of amateur mechanics and technicians who will jump madly at the chance to assemble their own helicopter. And why not? Is a helicopter any different from a hot-rod?

L. A. Burt

PUMP IT IN!

By Dale Lord

THAT VITAL, incredibly complex fluid which is human blood is now as commonly handled as if it were water. Blood transfusions are an automatic procedure in most operations, and one of the major problems of health authorities is to obtain sufficient quantities of blood.

The familiar picture of the blood-transfusion process, with a container full of the liquid attached by a rubber tube to the arm of the patient while the blood drips by gravity into the vein or artery, may soon be changed. This gravity-feed system is proving impractical where large volumes of blood have been lost.

The reason for this is the fact that, if an accident victim has lost more than three pints of blood, deterioration may set in the sensitive brain tissues within five minutes, much too short a time in which to replace the blood, since under gravity only a single pint of blood can be put in the human body in about forty minutes time!

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To combat this, scientists have designed an ingenious pump which literally pumps blood mechanically into the veins or arteries at the fabulous rate of about a pint in one and a half minutes!

The future in the case of general work with blood continues to look brighter. Chemical research is disclosing the theoretical possibility of synthesizing the essential elements of blood so that perhaps, in the not too remote future, an artificial blood can be prepared in quantity, eliminating the tedious, sometimes impractical, —and certainly unreliable—process of depending upon donors.

A FISH TALE

THE USE of high frequency sound apparatus ("sonar" it is called) by commercial fishing companies for locating schools of fish is a familiar process now, used widely and successfully. In addition, the same apparatus can be used for probing the ocean's depths to permit safe navigation in reefy waters or near shore.

Soon this same equipment, on a smaller scale of course, will be avaiable to the amateur Isaac Walton. He'll soon have a personal sonar set which will bring the fish to him in the form of pips on an oscilloscope tube.

A fourteen-pound portable sonar apparatus designed to work off a storage battery has been designed and will be released to the public very soon. It is a basic set consisting of a power supply, a high frequency sonic generator and a suitable beam focusing device along with indicating equipment. It consumes no more power than a small radio set. Mounted in any sort of a boat, it is capable of locating fish, the sea or lake bottom, objects on the bottom, determining the nature of the bottom and all the other things its big brother can do. Think of the stories that this gadget will inspire!

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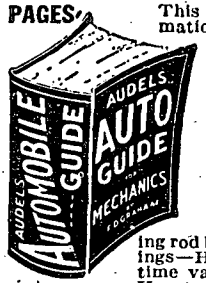

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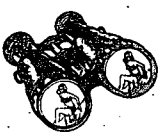

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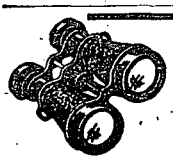

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other day, my sonar picked up a forty-inch pike!"—or. "Honest, Mike, my sonar spotted a school of bass that must have run into the hundreds..."—and so on. If they slap some sort of recording device on this machine, fish stories will be a thing of the past.

The main use, however, of the small sonar will be for operating shorewards with moderately small boats or even fairly large ones—with safety. You won't have to worry about grounding or running on shoals, for at each instant you'll know exactly what sort of a bottom lies beneath you.

• *Glenn Otis*

IT TAKES TWO

By E. Bruce Yaches

"YOU THEORY boys give me a pain in the neck. All you do is mess around with math. Take your nose out of the books and work up a good honest sweat over a machine—or even a drafting board. You guys won't change the world. The future belongs to the engineers!"

"Brother," the log table artist says coolly, flipping aside a copy of *The Physical Review*, "you need some re-educating. Why if it wasn't for us theoreticians, you monkey wrench experts and pencil pushers wouldn't get anywhere. Why..."

That's the kind of argument you hear a dozen times if you wander into a college cafeteria or an industrial lunchroom, or wherever technicians get together. Invariably the "theoretical boys" disagree with the "practical boys". Each group thinks the future will be molded by them, ignoring the interdependence of one upon the other.

In recognition of this mistaken attitude and to lay the ground-work for more cooperation between theoreticians and engineers, a number of educational organizations have gone out of their way to write up and point out the essential interlocking of the two types. Before us, they point out (particularly members of the Atomic Energy Commission), lies a future of incredible richness and fantastic complexity. To fulfill its promise, two specialized types of thinkers and workers are going to be needed. On one hand you need the men who think and plan, who work in an apparently impractical fashion—and then turn up with things like rocket engines and the atomic bomb! On the other hand are the detail men, the engineers, skilled blends of thinkers and doers whose heads and hands translate ideas into shining, gleaming things of metal and stuff.

The future is in the hands of the engineers no less than the scientists, say research heads, so let's get the two working together.

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"Net Profit-$75.56 ON VERY FIRST DAY!"

Reported Presto Salesman R. E. MEADE. "The sky's the limit" on Presto profits because of America's serious need for this new fire extinguishing discovery.

WOULDN'T you like to be making the kind of money R. E. Meade made? Of course, not everybody makes such profits on the very first day. But, how do you like profits like these:

A Florida salesman earned $600 in one month. An Ohio man earned $2100 in 2 months. A New York salesman earned $1500 in one month. A New Hampshire salesman added the Presto as a *sideline* and picked up an extra $1800 in 20 months.

What Is the Secret?

PRESTO contains an amazing new chemical —"Chlorobromomethane" or "C.B." developed as a secret defense against fire during the war.

In comparing the effectiveness of "C.B." in fighting various kinds of fires an authoritative testing laboratory states: "It has been proved that *'C.B.' is about 1.5 to 6 times as effective as other common extinguishing agents on an equal weight basis.*"

This extra effectiveness of "C.B." means that Presto can be made light and handy enough for even a woman or child to use. Just a twist of the knob . . . and flames disappear! "Sells on sight" to civil defense workers, owners of homes, cars, stores, farms, service stations, boats, motorcycles, factories, offices and to stores for resale.

Why Large Presto Profits Are So Easy

Everyone is terrified at the very *thought* of *FIRE! Every year* fire kills more than 11,000 people. Most people who see Presto in action want one or more—ESPECIALLY WHEN THE PRICE IS ONLY $3.98 EACH!

You can demonstrate Presto in a few minutes, and every sale will net you $1 or more. We refill your demonstrator free . . . and we give you dramatically powerful printed sales material to "talk from" . . . free certificates testifying that Presto is GUARANTEED FOR 20 YEARS.

YOU DON'T NEED TO INVEST A PENNY. Just collect and *keep* $1 or more every time you write an order—we collect the balance and deliver the extinguisher. (Or if you *wish*, you can buy from us at extra-low wholesale prices and then make up to $2.18 profit per unit supplying both dealers and retail customers—we'll send you free details.

Start Now—Mail Coupon

Get started in this rich new field now. Don't "put it off"! Every day you hesitate may cost you $10, $15, or even $50 you could otherwise be making. Mail the coupon NOW for everything you need to get started right away!

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R. E. MEADE

"You should have named your extinguisher 'Miracle' instead of 'Presto'. I have never seen fire extinguished so quickly and thoroughly. A small fire just doesn't have a chance with *Presto*. My sample order of two dozen brass *Prestos* arrived late Thursday afternoon. Friday morning, in 15 minutes, I had orders for 18 extinguishers. Mind you this all happened in 15 minutes and without the first demonstration. By Friday evening the balance of 2 doz. were sold and orders taken for a dozen more. I had made a net profit of $75.56 the first day! Who said it couldn't be done? If you find such a man send him to me."

R. E. Meade, Columbus, Ohio

"For every hour I have devoted to the Presto, I find that I have earned an average of $15.20 an hour. I am now convinced that extraordinary money can be made in this safety field. I am devoting more of my time to this product now since I have discovered that the earnings on this item are greater than any item I have handled in the past."

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CHARLES KAMA

This Presto salesman from Texas was feaured as "Salesman of the Month" on the front cover of a sales magazine. He told the magazine's reporter:

"I think I've succeeded pretty well. I'm making more than a thousand dollars a month—and I haven't touched bottom yet."

Only Presto Has All These Features!

- Ends Fire as Fast as 2 Seconds
- Chemical Contents 1.5 to 6 Times More Effective than Others on an Equal Weight Basis
- Weighs Less than 1 Lb.
- Easily Held in One Hand — Even by a Child
- Needs No Inspection or Re-Charging
- —Does Not Corrode or Deteriorate
- Costs Only $3.98—Yet Out-Performs Bulky Extinguishers Costing Several Times as Much
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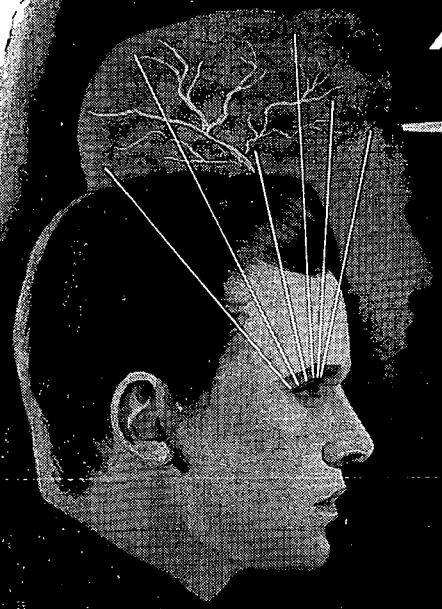
In Your Mind's Eye



The Secret of MENTAL CREATING

IF you just like to dream, read no further. There comes a time when your fancies *must be* brought into light—and stand the test of every-day, hard realities. Are you one of the thousands—perhaps millions—whose thoughts never get beyond the stage of *wistful wishing?* Do you often come to from a daydream with the sigh, "If only I could bring it about—*make it real?*"

All things begin with thought—it is what follows that may take your life out of the class of those who hope and dream. Thought energy, like anything else, can be dissipated—or it can be made to produce actual effects. *If you know how to place your thoughts* you can stimulate the creative processes within your mind—through them you can assemble things and conditions of your world into a happy life of accomplishment. *Mental creating* does not depend upon a magical process. It consists of *knowing how* to marshal your thoughts into a power that draws, compels and organizes your experiences into a worth-while design of living.

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